

Captive by Emsy_Things

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Emotional Hurt, Gay Billy Hargrove, Heavy Angst, Homophobic Language, Human Experimentation, Hurt/Comfort, Implied Childhood Sexual Abuse, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Implied/Referenced Cheating, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con, Imprisonment, Loss of Identity, Mind Manipulation, Psychic Abilities, Swearing, Torture

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Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove & Steve Harrington, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Billy Hargrove, Jonathan Byers & Billy Hargrove, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Robin Buckley & Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Will Byers/Original Male Character(s)

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Summary:

Just when a normal life finally seemed within El's grasp, she's dragged back into the clutches of the Upside Down. In her dreams she's being visited by the ghost of Billy, but why does it feel like the Mind Flayer is watching them?

Max is struggling to cope with her grief, especially as she's starting to think there's a lot she didn't know about her brother. Will her desire

to uncover his secrets cause a rift between her and the Party?

Billy is clutching to the scraps of his self, torn apart by his captors. Will he give in or find a way to fight back? What if the key to his survival is the changes the Mind Flayer made to his body?

When the cold winds of winter blow, will they be prepared to face their demons?

1. Aftermath

The sound of sirens is a muffled white noise to Max as she lays curled up in El's arms, staring at the lifeless body of her brother through a film of tears. Her hands leave prints on her legs from the black blood soaking Billy's top, as she brought them closer to her chest. She couldn't tear her eyes away, the hoarse sound of his voice still echoing in her head.

"I'm sorry."

The last thing she'll ever hear him say. The words made her feel like she was watching that tentacle thing stab through his chest again, the knowledge that his last breath was taken with such guilt crushing down on him. The events of last Halloween seem insignificant in this moment, faced with the reality of Hawkins, of Earth, without his looming presence.

The repetitive tapping from El on her shoulder and the slap of footsteps towards them, brings Max out of the buzzing nothingness of her shocked state of mind. She slowly lifts her head, her gaze automatically seeking out Lucas. He slows down, approaching gingerly as he meets her gaze with a weariness tightening the edges of his eyes. El's hand moves from her shoulder as Lucas kneels beside them, his arms pulling Max gently towards him to envelop her into a comforting embrace. His voice soft against her ears as he whispers consoling words that, though sweet, do nothing to soothe the aching in her chest. She didn't raise her head from his chest, even as she felt the others surround them; it felt like to acknowledge them would break the illusion of time holding its breath for her, mourning alongside her.

A new pair of arms pulls her from Lucas's embrace, and she finds herself close to suffocating between the tight press of numerous bodies against her. The tickle of hair and the faint scent of orange blossom against her nose revealed it to be Nancy who was holding her against her chest now. She breathed her scent in deeply, readying herself to face the soldiers she could hear swarming the mall, the

bright light of their torches swinging around the scene before them. The carcass of a thirty something foot mass of rotting flesh and bones - she didn't want to think of whose right now - and her brother before it, black blood oozing from gaping wounds. She began sobbing into Nancy's chest again as the soldiers forced them away from the bodies, to the flashing lights outside.

Outside of the mall they were guided to a line of ambulances that were ordered to check them over. El was brought over to where Max was getting her cheek looked at, Mike helping her walk as he supported her with an arm around her waist. The paramedic quickly pressed an ice pack into Max's hands as she rushed to examine El's leg. After El had pulled out that gross growth from the Mind Flayer's bite, Jonathan had used the heated knife to cauterise the wound so they wouldn't have to worry about her bleeding out as they fought against the Mind Flayer. Max had hated hearing her screams once again but knew that if they had had to run, they wouldn't have been able to spare a thought as to the condition of her open wound. And run they had. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to ignore the phantom feeling of Billy's hand striking her. She wished it wasn't going to be one of her last memories of him. That this whole week hadn't been the last times she would interact with him, when it hadn't even been him, she'd been interacting with. With her eyes closed, she jolted as she felt a hand softly caress her bruised cheek. Her eyes shot open and she flinched before she recognised it was Lucas before her.

"I'm- Sorry, Max, I'm sorry. Does it hurt a lot? It's such a dark bruise and it's come up so fast."

Lucas fumbled out the apology as he snatched his hands back to his sides. The earnest worry on his face had Max cracking a small smile, her chest feeling warm with affection. She took hold of his right hand with hers that wasn't holding the ice pack and squeezed it gently. He smiled back, slow and cautious he took the ice pack from her with his free hand and pressed it gently to her cheek. Max could tell from the small twitches at the corners of his lips that he wanted to say something, but she was grateful for him holding himself back from doing so. She just wanted to pretend a little longer that reality didn't exist outside of them, just bask in this sweet moment with him.

Joyce wasn't sure how she had made it outside. Everything just seemed like such a blur until she had spotted Will huddled under a blanket in the back of an ambulance. Panic had taken hold of her seeing him there, flashes of all the times in the past few years in which she had seen her little boy being examined by medical staff. She rushed towards him, being met halfway when Will noticed her too and ran to her. She could feel him shaking in her arms as she held onto him tight, as if by holding him so tight she could keep him safe forever in her arms. However, she knew better; that they would forever be haunted by Hawkins and the monsters it constantly drew towards it.

As Joyce caught sight of El, limping and distressed with tears in her clothes and hair in disarray, a hollow ache settled deeper within her chest. Their eyes met and Joyce saw the moment that El realised it was just her, reading the grief on her face. The tears that fell in silent sobs as El collapsed in on herself. Until that moment Joyce hadn't realised how much she'd seen El as older than her years but seeing her fall apart at the loss of Hopper she was reminded of just how young she really was. She was just a little girl who had seen more than anyone deserved to have seen. A little girl who had lost the only true father, true parent, she had ever had.

Joyce let go of Will as she saw Mike running to the sobbing El, the rest of the kids not far behind. *God, they were just kids*, Joyce thought, *still so very young*. A fire began to burn inside her as she thought of how very little she had been able to protect them. That in all the time she and Hopper had been chasing after un-magnetised magnets and hiding out at Murray's, these kids had been fighting the true monster all alone. A sharp sense of guilt bit at her chest but she pushed it aside, now was not the time to wallow in her regrets when these children before her needed her to be strong for them. She had to be; she was the only adult left they felt they could rely on.

There was a cough from behind her and she turned her head to see Dr. Owens standing there, head slightly lowered solemnly.

“I’m sorry that this conversation has to happen now, feels entirely inappropriate considering your loss. Jim Hopper was a great man, I will forever be grateful for the aid he gave me, lesser men would have left me in that stairwell.” Owens fiddled with his hands as he spoke, nervousness evident in his stance.

“However, considering the circumstances, it is of utmost importance that you understand what will be given as the official story of events.” He waited for nods of acknowledgement from them.

“Okay then, the story is that the kids had arranged an unofficial party at Scoops Ahoy due to their familiar relationship with the employees. Jonathon and Nancy had decided to take advantage of the free ice cream for a date. However, unknown to the employees, there was an electrical fault that started a fire. You kids got trapped in the food court. Billy Hargrove, who had been on his way to pick up his sister, saw the fire alongside numerous passers-by and they had all ran inside to try and help upon hearing your calls for help.” At the mention of Billy’s name Max flinched and Joyce reached out to lay a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“However, they became unfortunate casualties of the fire as they became trapped. Joyce, you and Hopper arrived on the scene and Hopper managed to clear a path to the kids but as the last of them made it outside the roof had begun to collapse and Hopper got stuck beneath a beam. He died a hero.”

El was sobbing harder now and Joyce felt herself beginning to shake, the reality that only them would ever know just how true that last statement was hit her harder than expected. Dr. Owens reached out and gave her a squeeze on her arm, an attempt at some level of comfort before walking back to a group of soldiers and an unknown man in a suit. Joyce continued to watch the group for a minute, a niggling sense of unease burrowing in her stomach.

“What will they do with the bodies left inside?”

The sound of Lucas’s voice brought Joyce back to the present, turning

to see him stood slightly before Max with her tightly gripping his elbow. Joyce met her wide eyes, the blue shining with unshed tears. *Oh, Joyce thought, her brother's body must still be inside with that...thing.* Joyce had never met Billy Hargrove, but she'd heard enough about him from the kids after they had gotten back home with Will last November. Definitely a piece of work and she had seen his type plenty of times within her life. Even married one. She had been given the impression that there was no love lost between him and Max but to look at her now, seems things are never always as they seem. Something she should be used to by now. She moved towards her and enveloped her in a hug, brushing a hand down her head to comfort her as she answered.

"I'm not sure sweetheart, but I think they'll be left inside as the fire burns so that it matches with the cover story. I'm sure they'll bring them out for burial though, don't worry about that. They'll want to give the families something, to help them mourn."

Except for Hopper, a little voice whispered in the dark recesses of her mind, we'll never get to bury his body because there's nothing left to do so. At this thought Joyce let go of Max to kneel before El, who didn't even raise her head from Mike's shoulder. Her stare was blank as she gazed through the rush of soldiers, tears falling silent and relentless.

"I'm so sorry sweetheart, more sorry than words could truly ever express. I'm sorry I couldn't save him. I'm sure that he's just happy he was able to save you, his brave daughter." Tears streamed down Joyce's face as she forced the words out through the lump in her throat.

"Brave. He was brave." El uttered the words softly as she turned her head slightly to take in Joyce. She reached a handout and brushed away the tears still falling down Joyce's cheeks, who closed her eyes upon feeling the soft touch from the young girl. Opening her eyes back up she grasped El's hand between both of hers and whispered softly.

"He was the bravest man I'd ever known. He loved you dearly and he wouldn't want us stuck here crying for him. Home. Let's go home. Together."

They all piled into Nancy's station wagon, including Steve and Robin. The kids arranged themselves so that Max was sat on Lucas's lap and El on Mike's, with Will squished between them. Steve had intended to try and take the 'Toddfather' to go and collect Dustin but had been met with protest from Ms Byers, who insisted they should all stick together tonight. So, he and Robin climbed into the boot of the car and directed the way back to Cerebro. They used the walkie-talkie they had left behind in the car to let Dustin and Erica know they were on their way and to wait by the road to save Ms Byers trying to make it up the hill. As they pulled up, the back door was yanked open before they had even fully stopped, Dustin's voice booming in the quiet.

"Guys! Guys, what happened? No one has told us anything! We were left stranded here! No one was answering us! We thought you were dead!" Dustin's voice was shrill and broke numerous times as he spoke. His eyes went wide as his words caused a sob to escape El and Mike whacked him on the arm.

"Thanks Dustin, way to fucking read the room! Maybe if you hadn't wasted time singing with your little girlfriend we wouldn't be in this position!" Mike's voice was hoarse and cutting, his glare sharp and bitter as it was aimed right at Dustin. The ferocity of the words had Dustin taking a step back in fear, a sense of shame washing over him.

"Hey! Shithead! Don't you dare blame Dustin, it's not his goddamn fault! Now is not the time to be blaming each other, when we've all fucking suffered shit tonight. Especially when the people who've lost their loved ones are right fucking here! Now apologise to Dustin and Ms Byers for swearing! Do we understand each other?" Steve waited for Mike to nod before continuing. "Sorry Ms Byers for my own swearing, these kids just make me crazy."

Steve's voice cut through the tension, his words causing Mike to

shrink in on himself a little and Dustin to clamber over Will to sit in the boot with him and Robin. Ms Byers even smiled a little at his last line. Erica just rolled her eyes and made to sit on Will's lap, next to her brother who settled a hand on her shoulder with a slight squeeze. She was thankful for the gesture, understanding it was his way of saying he's glad she's okay.

The ride to the Byers continued in silence, apart from the muttered apologies between Mike and Dustin; the latter had burrowed himself between Steve and Robin, gripping tightly to Steve's elbow. His hand was a shock of heat and sweat against his cool skin, the night having chilled considerably, and he was still stuck in his sailor uniform; which would have to do for one more night as Steve doubted any of Jonathan's clothes would fit him. He hoped a quick wash in the bathroom sink would rid it of the smell of stale blood, sweat and vomit. He hugged Dustin tighter to his side, his mind finally starting to process just how close they had been to dying these past few days. How close to death they had been tonight. Except they were still alive. They were still alive because Billy-fucking-Hargrove had stood before that fucking gross beast and screamed holy hell at it as he held it back. Held back a creature the size of the fucking mall from killing a little girl Steve didn't even think he had known before all this bullshit had started. Wasn't that the biggest fucking irony on Earth, that the guy who had had no qualms of beating his face in and was only stopped by his baby sister stabbing him with a boatload of drugs, had saved the life of his sister's friend and consequently all of theirs too. Steve knew, they all knew, if that monster had gotten El then they would have all been screwed. He didn't know how to feel about how in doing so, Hargrove had put his own life on the line, that it killed him. Max's scream of his name was haunting. Steve was sure he would be hearing it in his nightmares for weeks. The true heroes though, were Hopper and Joyce. Hargrove may have died saving El – and them – but Hopper had died saving everyone, the whole fucking world.

Steve's interactions with Hopper had been limited, the odd warning for too loud parties before Nancy and then all the shit that's happened with the Upside Down. However, just from those he could tell he was a good man, who may have appeared gruff and intimidating but really cared about the safety of the town and the

people he loved. *Like El*, Steve thought. He barely knew her himself, only really from what the other Party members had told him and the odd occasions she had been allowed to attend Party 'meetings'. Even then, they didn't really interact as she was always mooning over Mike, the two disappearing together and leaving Steve to focus on Dustin's loudmouth or Lucas and Max's harmless bickering. It was no wonder to Steve that the two had broken up numerous times already, when it's been less than a year since they even started dating. Sometimes it was hard to remember Max and Billy weren't actually blood related, especially when they had such similar facial features as well. If Steve had a death wish he'd ask Mrs Hargrove if they were actually related. Fortunately for him, he had no such wish, especially after tonight.

Steve didn't realise they had arrived at the Byers until Dustin accidentally kned him in the balls as he climbed over him to get out. He groaned, winded, and practically fell out of the boot only caught by Robin at the last second. She giggled as he struggled to get his feet beneath him, patting his head like he was some kind of dog. If Steve wasn't so sure she was just trying to lighten the mood for them all he'd have pushed her off him but instead he gave her a deadpan look and barked. The sound had Robin in stitches, tears leaking out the corners of her eyes but received a glare from Mike and confused looks from the rest of the kids. Steve just waved them off, picking himself up and catching up to them with an arm draped over Robin's shoulder. Nancy gave them an odd glance, lingering on his arm, but just shook her head and joined Ms Byers in a search for blankets.

The kids were surrounding the phone, seemingly arguing over whose parents should be called first. Max stood slightly apart from them and it hit him that she might have to be the one to tell her stepdad his son was dead. God, he hoped that they had already been informed or that Ms Byers would take control of that conversation. Erica seemed to have had enough of the arguing and snatched the phone from Dustin's hands, dialling her number and shooing everyone but Lucas away. Lucas took the phone back off her just as his mum answered. Steve decided to leave them to it, unable to comprehend how he'd even begin to explain how Erica had been with him because he had used her to sneak into an underground Russian base beneath Starcourt Mall. Erica's voice popped into his head, the phrase "child

endangerment” causing a spike of guilt. God wasn't that the understatement of the century. He ignored her voice and joined Jonathan in the kitchen, who was busy making something and it was only then that Steve felt the throbbing hunger in his stomach. He realised that all he had eaten in the past god knows however many hours was a few handfuls of popcorn he had nicked from a bin and then thrown up less than an hour later. Jonathon must have heard his stomach rumbling for he glanced back at him, a small smirk pulling at his lips.

“Underground Russian labs not have any food?”

Steve scoffed, slightly annoyed that Jonathan was able to find such amusement in what they had suffered through, but he pushed the annoyance down, now was not the time.

“Not unless you count jars of glowing green acid.” Steve responded, stealing a bit of cheese from where Jonathan had been making ham and cheese sandwiches.

Luckily, before Steve had to try and think of more topics of conversation, Ms Byers walked into the kitchen with El beneath her arm. El avoided their glances and just sat at the table, keeping her head down but grabbing hold of Ms Byers hands as she settled them on her shoulders. It wasn't long before the rest of the Party came rushing in, snatching the plates of sandwiches and sitting by her; Mike slid a sandwich before El and she tilted her head to smile softly at him. Steve noticed Max hadn't joined them yet and saw Ms Byers give El one last squeeze before she went to look for her.

The kids had long since finished off their sandwiches and Steve had been joined at the counter by Robin – her eyes red like she had just been crying – by the time Ms Byers and Max had re-joined them. No one commented on the visible tear tracks on Max's face.

“My mum said it's fine that I stay over but to be back early tomorrow so she can see for herself that I'm okay. I told her that we were all staying to be here for El.” Dustin's voice was atypically quiet, the sombre mood definitely affecting him. Ms Byers gave him a sad smile and ruffled his hair. Nancy spoke up from her place between Jonathon and Mike.

“I just told our mum we were too tired to drive back and so we would be staying here. I thought that it would be best to explain things face to face tomorrow rather than over the phone.”

From his position behind her, Steve was able to see Jonathon reach out and squeeze her thigh. He felt a twinge of familiar jealousy, because although he was no longer in love with Nancy, he still missed the relationship they had had. He could admit to himself he was lonely, especially during the month Dustin had been away. That loneliness was the reason he had kept trying so hard at flirting with the pretty girls who came into Scoops. However, as he felt Robin's shoulder brush his as she was fidgeting and trying to arrange her uniform so that it would stop sticking to her awkwardly, he felt a rush of affection that broke the rising wave of loneliness. Looking around at everyone he understood that he wasn't alone anymore.

Max could hear the others talking around her, but her mind was too befuddled to make sense of what was being said. Part of her just wanted to scream at them to shut up! Let her think! The other part just wanted to go home and curl up in Billy's bed, to surround herself with the smell of his disgusting cologne and gross sweat, to cry until she couldn't anymore. She couldn't stop thinking of him and she hated it. They had never been close, spent more time arguing and insulting each other than anything else but at least back in California it had felt like they held no real weight. After the move though, it all became so real, how angry he had been when they first got here and how much she hated him becoming so cruel and aggressive. He had never been nice even before, but this was a whole new level of dickhead-ness. She was terrified of his anger but worse was not knowing why; she knew he hated leaving California, especially so far away from any beaches and that he had argued with his dad a lot before they set off, but she didn't get why he was so angry with *her*.

Being here just turned him into dynamite, with any little spark

making him explode. He and his dad were constantly arguing, and he would drive off afterwards like he had demodogs at his heels; went looking for fights, she guessed, since he always came back covered in bruises. At least that hadn't changed from California.

When he warned her away from Lucas, she didn't fucking get his problem; at least the last boy she'd had a crush on that he warned her off of was because he'd seen him shove a girl off her skateboard saying "girls shouldn't skate" and Billy had told her "boys like him aren't worth your time". Lucas never did anything like that though, well unless she counted making her upset by not letting her join in on Party meetings, but she knew it wasn't really his fault, she had just used him as a scapegoat. After everything that had happened at the Byers, Dustin had said he had obviously attacked Lucas because he was a racist bastard but Max wasn't so certain; he'd never had an issue about things like that back in Cali and they had lived in the crappier side of Los Angeles after moving in with Neil, who Max couldn't say the same the of. She had moved with her mum from the small apartment they had in Santa Monica, which was a downgrade from her dad's house in Beverly Hills. Neil's house there was even smaller than the one they have here in Hawkins. It wasn't like her dad's house was huge or anything, they'd only been able to live there because he had inherited it after her grandparent's died before she was born. Really, she just resented that she had to live even further away from her dad and that Neil was trying to act fatherly towards her. He wasn't her dad. Her dad is the best and she still couldn't understand how her mum had chosen him over her dad, he was so meh, just another sexist bore like Mr. Wheeler.

If Dustin had been calling Neil a racist bastard then she could understand but she had seen the guys Billy had hung out with in California, how the guy from next door whose window Billy would climb through to get away from his dad made Lucas look light-skinned. Max couldn't remember his name, but she remembered how he had towered over Billy and that he used to make fun of him when they played basketball, calling him short-ass or Thumbilly after Thumbelina. Neil had hated him and never tried to hide it but especially after Max let it slip that Billy would sneak over to his house near every day. The next day Billy had found nails holding his window shut and it had sparked a huge fight, one of the worst she

had overheard and actively made herself forget. Told herself that he deserved what happened to his window and whatever other punishment he got, when a girl down the street told her they must have been doing coke, why else would they be spending so much time in his room?

However, there were times back in Cali in which they had actually gotten along, like when he used to take her for ice cream if she had had a really bad day, saying it was just to stop her whining but he let her choose a fancy sundae instead of a two-scoop cone. Sometimes, he'd take her to Venice Beach with him and she'd watch him surf for a bit before going to the arcade across the street. He once tried to teach her to surf but after she ended up dragged under a wave and nearly drowned, he hadn't let her back on a board. A few days after that incident though, he came home with her first skateboard and took her to the local skate park, cleaning and bandaging her knee when she skinned it trying to copy a move she'd seen another kid do. Neil hated that board. Billy had hidden it under his bed for months and only let her use it when he took her to the park but one day she snuck into his room whilst he was out and took it to play on the street. Neil caught her when he came home early from work and he had ranted on and on about how skating wasn't the right kind of sport for a young lady like her and who gave her that board? When she said Billy bought it, his face had gone very still except for the twitching of his gross moustache. That moustache always reminded her of her creepy old neighbour back in Santa Monica who used to leer at her from his window as she played in the shared garden. When Billy got home his dad confronted him and Max was sent to her room before it got too heated, taking her board with her. Later that evening, Billy had stormed into her room and snapped her board, glaring at her with the coldest eyes she had seen from him yet.

Billy had only gotten worse after that, he stopped taking her to the beach or the skate park or for ice cream on bad days. He got in more fights and would disappear for hours, sometimes coming back drunk and antagonising his dad. He grew his hair out even more and got a perm, Max remembered how purple Neil's face had gotten with rage; it was the first time she had heard him call Billy a faggot, how he thought he had a son not a daughter and that he better shave that shit off. Instead, Billy came back the next day with an earring in his

left lobe, but Neil just huffed and said at least it's not his right. The only time Max had ever seen the two of them get on was a few months after Billy's sixteenth birthday, when his dad spent his weekend helping him fix up the Camaro Billy had saved up and bought. That weekend they didn't argue once. One year later Billy got in his biggest fight yet, with the guy from next door, and ended up in hospital with a concussion, broken ribs and cracked fingers of his left hand. Neil had said at least it wasn't his right. A month later they were moving.

After the fight at the Byers and her threatening to crush Billy's balls with that nail-filled bat, he had done as she asked and not gone near her friends. He still drove her around because they had no other choice, but he never said a word. In fact, he barely spoke at home either unless in response to his dad, it was like he was pretending she and her mum didn't exist; it pissed her off until Christmas but when she'd gone back to her room that evening and seen a new skateboard on her bed she had been hit with a strange sense of loneliness. It was stupid. He was a mean jerk and hadn't apologised for anything, but she couldn't deny she missed him, missed their shitty arguments and insults. On New Years Day she barged into his room and he didn't even shout at her, just glared and it was so fucking weird that she even told him so. She offered him a truce, that they take this new year as a new start. Things were better from then on, though it took a long time for them to fall into a fond but still slightly antagonistic relationship but looking at Mike's relationship with Nancy showed her that that was at least normal. He didn't take her for ice cream or to the beach or to a skate park like before but he did take her for burgers or milkshakes at the local diner, occasionally joined her in the arcade and he beat Dustin's Dig Dug record, and when it got hotter he took her to the public pool and bought her ice lollies – until he started working there, she didn't want to be around for that. They were finally at a point in which they wouldn't correct others if they called them brother and sister, because that was finally what they were. Then the Mind Flayer had to come back, had to take over her brother and she couldn't save him like they had saved Will last year. She wasn't enough to save him but El was. El brought him back but he still died.

Max didn't realise that she had started sobbing until she felt arms

encircling her. She looked up and could see the blurry image of El holding and crying along with her. Max would have felt bad for not doing more to comfort El too, that El was left to try and console her when she herself had lost Hopper but she couldn't, not yet when everything was still so raw for her. A tiny part of her she tried to bury deep inside was jealous, that Billy had responded to El and not her, that they shared such an emotional moment before he died but all Max got was his choked out "I'm sorry". It was irrational and cruel, but she still felt it.

El leant her head against Max's, mumbling under her breath so quietly that it took a while for her to realise that she was repeating "I'm sorry" over and over again.

"Don't say that! You have nothing to be sorry for! You were the only one who managed to reach him through the Mind Flayer's control, without you we would all be dead. Billy...what he did, he must have known that there was no way he could truly fight against it and survive. You...you were able to save him when I couldn't because yeah, he died, but at least he died as himself and not as a pawn for the Mind Flayer." Max frowned and pulled back slightly so she could take El's face between her hands, forcing her to raise her head so they could meet eyes, watery blue to glistening brown. "Thank you."

Max's words made El cry harder, but she was also smiling slightly at least, a small single laugh escaping as she rubbed the tears from her eyes.

"He was good. In the end. I hope he is happy now."

Dustin barely let El finish before he bursts. "You make it sound like he was never happy. I'm pretty sure he was ecstatic when he beat the crap out of Steve last year.". This is promptly followed by a shout of "Hey!" from Steve in an offended tone. Max wanted to turn and glare at Dustin, maybe punch him in the arm, but couldn't tear her eyes away from El's, whose had gone all concerned.

"No. Not for a long time. Since the pretty woman from the beach left. He begged her to come back. Left him with the man who was like Papa."

Max froze, her blood going cold. "What do you mean 'Like Papa'? Who? Neil?"

El took hold of Max's hands and squeezed them tightly, her eyes going hard. "Dad. His Dad, he hurt the pretty woman and Billy. Like how Papa hurt Mama and me. Bad Man. Said bad things to Billy, he repeated them to others. He was like me. Angry and hurt so hurt others." El patted her chest. "Same."

She ignored the outburst from the rest of the Party, Mike the loudest, stating they were nothing alike. She focused all her attention on Max, who was beginning to breathe heavily but shakily, eyes wild and intense with a deep frown marring her brow. Her entire body was trembling slightly.

"No. No! No. You're lying. You have to be! I would know if he was like that! I would. I would have seen something! Neil's a dick, he's racist, sexist and homophobic and they don't get along. Didn't get long. They argue...argued all the time but that's because Billy is... was a dick. But I've never seen him hit him! I would have seen something! I would have! I would *have*! I'd know! Not you! You didn't know him! He wasn't your brother, he was mine! He was my brother!" Max had stood, shouting as her blood boiled with rage. She was the one who lived with them for years, who witnessed their tempers clashing and the aftermath. Not El, who met him for the first time in that damn sauna!

Max was ready to run from the room, but she was grabbed by Joyce before she could. Joyce held her tightly and brushed her hand over her head like she had outside the mall. She couldn't help but sink into the comfort Joyce offered. She cleared her throat and Max felt the vibration against her cheek.

"Sometimes, sweetheart, we find ourselves too close to things to see them clearly and finding out that such things could be happening, and you never knew, feels awful because it dredges up so many questions and what ifs that plague you. But please understand that not knowing is not your fault, no one wants to think a parent could treat their child like that and so we always find excuses. Until it can no longer be ignored." Joyce lifted Max's head, mirroring what she had done to El only moments earlier. "You didn't know, because they

didn't want you to. They made excuses and they hid it. I bet he told you he got his bruises from fights, right? But he was the only one you ever saw hurt."

Max sniffled and lifted her head. "Why wouldn't he tell someone? Why wouldn't he tell *me*? Why hide it? Hiding it just meant he could *keep doing it*."

Joyce brushed away stray tears from her cheeks and moved a piece of hair that had fallen from its braid behind her ear, taking the opportunity to cup her cheek. "Oh honey, it's not that simple. No matter how awful, he's still his dad and from the sounds of it, he's the only parent he had left. Billy might have been conflicted or his dad made him too scared to tell anyone. Maybe someone did find out, but his dad was able to talk himself out of trouble. I've seen him about; he certainly knows how to turn on the charm when he wants to. And sometimes, for boys that look and act like Billy, some would view it just as a father teaching his son how to be a man. Trust me, I can vouch that such people exist."

Max saw Joyce's eyes flick towards where Jonathan had been sat last she looked and Max was hit by a sense of guilt again, for making Joyce think of things that were obviously sensitive to her. God, she felt like an idiot, she'd heard how shitty a dad Will had from the rare occasions he mentioned him. Of course, Joyce would understand.

Max considered her words, focusing on her mention of his *fights*. She'd seen Billy covered in bruises, but they always came with some story about how he'd hit on some girl and her boyfriend didn't appreciate it, or that some shithead had decided to test his luck against him and had to be taught a lesson. Though, when she thought harder about it, she couldn't remember seeing him with spilt or bloody knuckles and with how badly he'd be beaten she couldn't imagine he wouldn't have fought back like a wild animal. Suddenly, she had a flash of when she had caught a glimpse of Billy after that night at the Byers, through the gap in his doorway she'd seen his chest and ribs were painted purple with bruises, older yellowing ones just above his hip. She had dismissed them as a result of his fight with Steve and that she must have missed Steve catching him in the ribs during all the chaos. She just thought it was strange when he spent the next few weeks wearing his shirts mostly buttoned up, since

she expected him to wear his bruises like a badge of honour.

Max had been grounded for sneaking out for like a week, but it was meaningless since Neil had Billy take her to the arcade when he wanted alone time with her mum. Billy was told to wait outside until they would leave to get home by nine, part of his punishment for not watching over her properly and so allowing her to sneak off. He was not allowed away from home for anything other than school, driving Max around or doing chores. No parties, no dates, no basketball for an entire month. Max didn't get why he was grounded for longer than her, especially as neither of them said anything about his fight with Steve, since she felt it was way too hard to explain when no one else could know about the Upside Down. It made sense if the whole grounded thing was an excuse to punish Billy, especially if those bruises had been from his dad and not Steve. If he couldn't do anything that risked his bruises being seen, then it wouldn't bring up unwanted questions. Their arguments, fights, the bruises and how much they hated each other, it all made sense if she believed what El said but Max couldn't accept it yet. It felt like if she accepted what El had seen in his memories, what her own were screaming at her, then her entire perception of reality would crumble. Even more then when she found out monsters were real.

She had so many questions running through her head. Did her mum know? Was this why Billy was always so angry? All the rules that he made her follow, were they actually his dad's? The biggest one of all was, did he blame her? Her breath hitched and she ran her hands through her hair, pulling out strands from the braids that fell around her face in disarray. The questions filled her mind like a million different voices, and she shook her head, trying to block them out. What was the point in these questions when Billy was now dead and would never be able to answer them?

She realised that everyone was silent, just watching her. Looking at their faces though, all she could see was concern. She took a deep breath, cleared her throat and sat back in her seat beside Lucas who reached out a hand slowly, giving her time to move away if she wanted, before gently taking hers. He ran his fingers gently over her palm to examine where Max hadn't realised she'd dug her nails in hard enough to leave imprints in her skin.

"I'm sorry Max. Didn't mean to make you so upset. Are you, ok?". El's voice was soft, barely more than a whisper but had a gravelly tone that suggested it would hurt her to talk any louder.

"No. No, I'm sorry El. It's just – it feels like too much to handle right now. Its hard to equate what you've told me with what I know and thought." Max tried to give her a reassuring smile but she's not sure it came out right. Thankfully, El just smiled back and hugged her.

Joyce felt out of her depth. It was bizarre to her how well she could handle monsters from another dimension invading Hawkins, or secret Russian labs but when faced with the revelation that Max's brother had been abused by his father and trying to comfort Max during her subsequent breakdown, she had drawn a blank. Honestly, she's not even sure what she had said to her, she was so stuck inside her own head. *Hopper would know what to do, Joyce thought, he'd be able to handle this.* Instead of letting the thought derail her, Joyce used it as motivation. Yeah, Hopper would know exactly what to do, but he's not here anymore, she was. She'd be damned if she was going to let grief hold her back. She'd been through this before with Bob and she hadn't given into that black hole then, she wasn't going to now. Not when his daughter sat before her, needing her.

Joyce ushered the kids into Will's room, piling blankets, spare pillows and duvets into their arms. They protested but she insisted it had been much too long and hectic a day, they'd barely slept all week and must be exhausted, that unfortunately everything would still be the same come morning. They settled down pretty quickly after that, unusually quiet but she wasn't surprised with how heavily everything must weigh on them, like it does her.

When she got back to the kitchen, Steve and that new girl – Robin? - had moved to sit beside Jonathon and Nancy, exchanging hushed whispers that stopped when they noticed her in the doorway.

Jonathan rushed towards her and dragged her into an embrace. It was the first time they had hugged since they had all separated at the mall. She let herself collapse within his arms, finally letting out the sobs she had been holding back. Jonathan just held her, stroking her hair and occasionally making soothing noises, but she could feel the warmth of his own tears against her skin. They just held on, keeping each other standing, for a few minutes but she was very aware of the others still sat at the table. She pulled away, rubbing Jonathan's cheek softly.

Turning back to the others, her gaze catches on Steve and the dark purple swelling of his eye. She approaches him, tilting his head back to examine the bruising further. He made protesting noises, but they puttered out as he looked up at her concerned face.

"Jonathan, there should be some ice in the freezer, could you wrap it up in a tea towel or something?". From the corner of her eye she saw him doing as she asked, holding it out for her when he was done. She pressed the homemade compress gently against Steve's eye for a few moments before he raised his own hand and held it himself. He nearly drops it, which causes a laugh to burst from the girl beside him, a soft "Dingus" slipping from her lips.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure we were properly introduced. I'm Joyce Byers, Will and Jonathan's mother, but everyone calls me Joyce. Well, except for Steve here.". She gives Steve's hair a ruffle which just makes the girl giggle even more.

"I'm Robin, I work with Steve at Scoops Ahoy in the mall. Well, I did, I guess. Pretty sure there'll be nothing left of Scoops after tonight.". She giggled again and it was then that Joyce noticed just how dilated her and Steve's pupils were. She decided not to ask; she wasn't sure she'd like the answer.

"The two of you seem close. It's always great when you get along with your co-workers. Unless...the two of you are also dating?". Robin let's out a loud guffaw in response to the question, the two of them stuttering out negatives. Joyce notices that Nancy's gaze had turned quite sharp on Robin. *Oh right*, Joyce thought, *I forgot Steve and Nancy had been dating last year*. She didn't think Nancy was jealous, but she knew from experience that it was still hard to hear

about your ex dating again. Especially after dating for over a year, she was pretty sure at least.

“Sorry if I’m dashing your hopes Mrs By- Joyce, but Dingus here isn’t my type. At all.”. Robin was biting her lip, seemingly trying her best to hold back more giggles. Steve just rolled his eyes at her.

“Yeah, she’s got a *real* special type Ms Byers, I’d never be able to meet the requirements.”. Steve dragged out the real and got a punch in the arm for it, though when he flinched back in pain, Robin quickly uttered apologies.

“Oh, well then it’s great you at least have a friend your own age now, Steve.”. Joyce bit back her own laugh at the shocked look on his face but the others couldn’t contain themselves. Even Jonathan joined in with the laughter and Joyce felt a weight lift from her chest.

“She’s got you there, Dingus. Your children are pretty great but I’m far greater. It’s an honour that you, Steve ‘The Hair’ Harrington, douchebag extraordinaire, get to be friends with me, Robin ‘Queen of the band geeks’ Buckley.”.

“Yeah, it’s a real goddamn honour to be mocked for the rest of my life.”. Steve scoffed, but a fond smile stretched his lips as he knocked his shoulder against Robin’s. It was a heart-warming scene to Joyce after all the horror.

“I’m sorry I have no fresh clothes to offer you, ones that would fit at least. Though Jonathon, maybe you’ve got some clothes that are too big?”.

“I might have, let me go check.” As Jonathon rushed to his room, Nancy turned to Steve and laid her hand on his forearm.

“I’m glad you’re okay...bruises not withstanding.”. She looked at Robin. “You too, I’m sorry you got dragged into this whole...mess. I know it’s a lot to comprehend, so if you ever need someone to talk to that’s not Steve, I’ll be there.”.

Robin inclined her head. “Thanks, but I think Steve’s enough to keep me sane. Shared trauma and all that, you know?”.

A strange expression befell Nancy, but the moment was broken by the return of Jonathan, holding a couple of shirts and a pair of sweatpants. "I found these. I- I think they were Hopper's, he must have given me them as hand me downs, even though they'd never fit me. They'll definitely be big enough at least. Though, I could only find one pair of sweatpants but I'm sure mine or my mums should work for you Nancy, and Robin."

Nancy grabbed the clothes and handed them out between them. "I'm pretty sure your mum's clothes would have fit me anyway, we're not that different in size.". Nancy gave Joyce a smile as she rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, I can't say the same so yours will have to do, buddy boy.". Robin said as she moved to stand by Jonathan, the top of her head clearing his by a tiny bit. Steve came up behind them both and patted them on the head, laughing loudly as Robin glared at him. Jonathan gave them both an awkward smile before heading back to his room to look for some bottoms for Robin.

When he came back, they arranged that Robin and Steve would take the sofas, though Joyce had tried to insist they take her bed and she'd sleep on the sofa instead. She took their uniforms after they had changed in the bathroom, shoving them into the washer and telling them to take them out and hang them over the dining room chairs when they were done, if they were still awake that is.

She said goodnight to Jonathon with an extra-long hug and a quick one for Nancy. When she popped her head into Will's room, she saw the kids asleep in a pile on the floor, taking comfort in the press of bodies. Her heart clenched seeing El asleep next to Will, her head on Mike's chest and holding hands with Max. She was glad that she had them but couldn't ignore that she was now alone in the world without Hopper. Straightening up, Joyce made the decision that tomorrow she would contact Dr. Owens and see what he could arrange to make sure El got to stay with her.

In her own room, she curled up beneath the covers and just let herself cry.

The next week passed in a blur of reporters and photographers from out of town, trying to get the big scoop on 'local hero Police Chief Jim Hopper' and if she thought the fire at Starcourt Mall was connected to Mayor Kline's corruption? It was driving her to the brink of insanity. She just wanted them to be left alone to deal with his death. The worst were the smarmy bastards who dared to ask what her relationship with Hopper had been like. She had slammed the door in their faces before they even finished. Luckily, Hop's adoption of El hadn't been public knowledge yet so it saved her from their questions and attention. Since the kids were still minors, it was their parents who were getting harassed instead. Karen had made numerous calls to Joyce, sharing curses for the ones that were practically camping out in her yard. The first phone call she had made though, she'd spent the entire time apologising for not having kept a closer eye on the kids, that she had been too wrapped up in her own issues that she had let them down. Joyce couldn't bring herself to disagree and comfort her, but she also felt like she too, had been too wrapped up in her own fixation that she had let herself lose sight that protecting her kids was her first priority. She'd thrown away all their magnets after that call, instead they were using tape to attach things to the fridge now. They had been too much of a reminder.

The day after the battle at Starcourt Mall, she had sat all the kids down and had them explain the events leading up to it. It had been awful to realise that it had already started before she and Hopper had found themselves on the run. It plagued her that maybe if they had gone looking for their kids before chasing after a machine that made her magnets not work, they could have been there for them sooner. However, she knew that if they hadn't been split like they were, they would never have found Alexei and learnt about the keys for that dreadful machine. That they wouldn't have been able to stop the Mind Flayer. Though she did still give the kids a lecture about running off into dangerous situations by themselves and not alerting them, the adults. She'd looked pointedly at Nancy and Jonathan to make sure she was including them in the lecture too.

El has been living with them ever since that night and neither of them could bring themselves to go back to the Cabin. It wasn't like there was much left to go back to after the fight with the Mind

Flayer. Joyce had given her a bunch of her clothes to wear in the meantime and even Will had offered up some of his that he had outgrown. She rarely spoke but Joyce couldn't blame her. Joyce had gotten in touch with Dr. Owens and had him make a certificate similar to the one he had given Hopper but replace the mother's name with her own. She could deal with accusatory glances from people in town if it meant that El was safe with her. She was just thankful that Hopper's overprotectiveness had meant he hadn't filed any paperwork regarding El yet, he had been waiting until he was completely sure she was safe. It had required Dr. Owens to falsify records of Joyce having put El up for adoption after birth and records of foster homes for El, but he had said it was all worth it. Now El was officially her daughter...their daughter.

When she had told Jonathan and Will the news, Will had just grinned and said he always knew she'd end up being his sister. The words had been incredibly bittersweet. Whilst she had them all gathered together, she had explained her plan to move out of Hawkins, that she had been thinking about it for a long time. It had upset them, of course it did, Will even refused to talk to her for the rest of the day but that night he had crawled into her bed and cuddled up to her like he had done when he was young. They cried and held each other but he listened as she explained how this town was tearing her apart, tearing them all apart, piece by piece and she just wanted to give them a place to be like any other kid their age. He told her he understood, that he wanted the same for her as well. They fell asleep cuddled up like that, and it felt upon waking like the last few years had never happened. The feeling didn't last for long.

They were attending two funerals next week, for Hopper and Billy Hargrove. El had asked to attend the latter but Joyce had already been intending to do so regardless, both for Max's sake and for the boy who had saved her daughter's life. She knew there would be lots of guests at Hopper's funeral, since he was the Chief. She had done all she could to help in the arrangements but since he was no longer married it was being taken care of by the station, mostly by Flo. She wasn't so sure about Billy's, other than what Max had told her about her stepdad only wanting it to be small. That although he had been popular at school, it only extended so far, with the only condolence calls they had received so far being some old friends from California

who'd heard about the fire on late night news and some of his teachers who had spoke of how unfortunate it was he had died before he had a chance to reach his true potential. Though, Max had spoke about when she had answered one call only to hear Karen on the other end, talking about how much of a shame it was that he had died so young, in his prime, how it had weirded her out a bit since it had sounded like she was crying. Joyce agreed it was weird, she hadn't even known that Karen had known Billy as anything more than Max's stepbrother that drove her around.

Joyce couldn't stand funerals. Standing around and pretending she gave a damn what other people had to say. Most worrying to her though, was that El had never been to a funeral before and she was no doubt going to attract a lot of attention. Joyce had told her that if it ever felt like it was too much for her, just let one of them know and they would leave, people's opinions be damned.

They hadn't yet told anyone else of their plans to move. To Maine, like Bob had asked her to last year, it felt like a way to celebrate his memory. Right now, she just wanted to take the time to plan and fantasise about their new life with their new family.

On the other side of the world, a pair of eyes opened to dull yellow lights and rusty metal walls. There was a loud shout in an unfamiliar language then the sharp sting of a slap. A buzzing brought forward flashes of a bathroom and an icy gaze. The feeling of cold air on a freshly shaved head created goose bumps. Another shout and a bright flare of orange that left a haze behind, before a scorching pain, stemming from the back of the neck, that forced out an echoing scream and for darkness to spread.

The soldier dropped the brand in the waiting cold water, hearing it

sizzle. Raw, red numbers stood out against the smooth skin of the prisoner's head, just above where the head and neck connected. It would be their new identity.

2. Three Months Later

[A/N: It was brought to my attention that the notes I left on the last chapter didn't appear when it was downloaded, so I'll be writing my notes here from now on. **(WARNING: Use of homophobic slurs, in the third section.)** This chapter has a lot of angst, dealing with a lot of things I felt the show didn't cover. Also, it appears I am incapable of writing short chapters. Comments are warmly welcomed!]

[Update A/N: The lovely Saighin helped me in realising an error about Billy having a Guns N' Roses tape, so it has been adjusted.]

They had really left. The thought was circling within Max's mind as she skated her way down the pothole ridden road to the cemetery. She had made it a habit to visit Billy's grave every week, sometimes taking flowers or with someone else joining her. Mostly Lucas who came to support her, or El who talked to Billy like Max does. The first time she came and spoke to his headstone like he could hear her, she had felt stupid, but at the same time lighter. So, every week she came and told him about what had been going on that week. It would be funny that she talked to him more in death than in life, if it wasn't so goddamned sad. She visited Hopper sometimes, always bringing him flowers, even though his grave always seemed to have fresh flowers resting against the headstone. She didn't talk to him for long, only for updates about El, since it didn't feel the same knowing his body wasn't resting beneath the grass. She had already been to the cemetery for her weekly visit, El had joined her to say goodbye to both of them, but with them moving today she needed the comfort that sitting by Billy's grave always gave her. She didn't understand it but wasn't willing to give it up.

The only time she had seen someone else come to visit Billy was when she had seen Mike's mum here last month, just standing there, staring down at him. She had no flowers with her but when Max got closer and Mrs Wheeler realised she was there, Max had been able to see the tear tracks on her cheeks before she turned her head and

hurried off. It was so weird, but Max never brought it up to Mike, especially as she never saw her here again. It felt strange to mention it, as if there was a piece of a puzzle that she was missing. Although, Steve has mentioned that he had visited his grave with Robin. It had surprised her, considering the turbulent relationship they had had, but he had said he didn't want to hold onto the past and wanted to clear the air so to speak, even if it was too late for Billy. She had hugged Steve and told him how much it meant to her that he did that, since she knew Billy had been a dick to him and never expressed any regret for their fight. Max wasn't the biggest fan of physical affection but it was something she was gradually opening herself up to more; it was hard to push away the idea that she wouldn't know when someone was going to die next and so wanted to get better at expressing how much she cared, just in case, and actions came easier to her than words.

With the sun out in full swing, the flowers lining the entrance to the cemetery seemed to glow within its rays. Bright yellows, oranges, reds and pinks of flowers Max can't name, give what would be a sad, dreary place a warm feeling. Like blossoming memories planted by its visitors. When she gets nearer to where Billy rests, she notices two figures beside him; a vaguely familiar guy kneeling and an unfamiliar blonde woman stood behind him. The woman is watching her draw near but when she's about three headstones away, a strange expression appears on the woman's face and she leaves, her arm nudging Max's shoulder as she walks past. Max watches her walk away with a frown on her face, there was something familiar about her, but Max knew she didn't know her. Maybe she's one of those housewives from Billy's old fan club. So gross, she scoffed in thought. Turning back, the man who had been kneeling was now right in front of her and she flinched away in surprise.

"You're Mad Max, right? Billy's little sister? Do you remember me?". His voice was deep and rich, slightly husky. It was the kind of voice that Max had imagined Gandalf having from that book the boys had made her read last year. He was huge, she felt tiny and vulnerable stood before him but there was a kindness to his face that reassured her she was safe with him. Looking into his hazel eyes, the sense of familiarity grew stronger, it was like she was transported back to their old house back in Cali, watching Billy getting thrashed at

basketball and laughing at the expression on his face every time he missed the basket. Her heart ached with a long familiar pain.

“Oh! Yes, I am, but everyone just calls me Max. Sorry, I recognise you but can't remember your name. You were Billy's friend, right? The one who lived next door? Is that why you're here?”. The words came out in a rush of excitement, this was the first time he'd had an actual friend come to visit him and Max was sure he'd have been happy to see him.

“Ah, well, can't blame you for not remembering, we never really talked before. I guess you could call us friends.”. It was hard to tell since his skin was so dark, but Max was pretty sure he was blushing. “Oh, right, my name's Luther. I had called, back when I heard about the fire, but his dad probably didn't mention it. I wanted to come for Billy's funeral but didn't think it would go down all that well. But, then a... mutual friend, got in touch and asked about Billy. When I told ‘em what had happened, they offered to take me with ‘em, to come pay our respects.”. Luther twisted a ring on his third finger – Max could hear Neil in her head saying, “At least it's not his left.” – whenever he mentioned Billy. Max got that feeling again, like she was missing something. It was becoming a common thing. If someone had told Max before they moved, that one day there would be a lot of things she didn't understand about Billy, she'd have laughed in their face, sure that Billy was the least complex person she'd ever met. Now the opposite was proving to be true. Some days she felt like she'd never known him at all.

“I-uh I planted some poppies, not sure if it's allowed or if they'll even grow but honestly, I don't care much. He told me they were his favourite, that the colour, uh-well, it reminded ‘im of you, your hair. Now I don't know much about your relationship with ‘im but he used to talk about you a lot. I mean, a lot of the time he'd just be whining but I could tell it wasn't meant in any real mean way, he just liked to pretend he weren't capable of fondness. But there weren't no denying that's what he was. He even had that photo, that one you took at that booth at the beach, hidden deep in his wallet. You were maybe ten or eleven and he said it had been the first time he'd taken you to the beach; you got ice creams and had ‘em in the booth, you smushed each other in the face and the camera caught you before you cleaned

up. Whenever I saw 'im looking at that picture he'd say you're a brat but at least you'd been a cute one. Though, I don't think I saw that picture again during that final year, before you moved.". His voice was so soft as he spoke, she found it very soothing. He lowered his head as he mentioned the move though, and Max remembered it had been a fight between them that had sparked Neil's desire to move. Although, with all that had been revealed about him and Billy's relationship, she couldn't trust that that was the truth.

"You weren't the one who fought with Billy, were you?". Luther closed his eyes like he was in pain at her questioning. He took in a deep breath and met her eyes with a steady gaze.

"No. I wasn't the one who put 'im in that hospital, but we did argue. I'm three years older than Billy. I was moving out, had got my own place. I wanted Billy to come with me, get 'im away from his dad. He refused. Said it wouldn't look right, the two of us living together in such a small place. That he had responsibilities he couldn't just abandon.". His hands were large and warm as he cupped her face within them. "He stayed for you Max. He stayed because no matter how shit he was at showing it, he cared for and loved you.". His thumbs swept away the tears that had begun to fall, before stepping away.

"I'm leaving tomorrow, I weren't able to get much time out of work and a lot of it has to go on travelling. Plus, I have to get back to my son. He was born just last month...we called 'im William, Billy for short. He's beautiful, the cutest baby around.". His smile was bright, and Max couldn't help but return it, no matter how much his words hurt. "I'll be getting married at the end of the year, if you find yourself in Los Angeles again come December 15th. It's just at the registry office, can't afford much more, especially as we're sure our boy will be going to college so got to save up. It's not like the place really matters, as long as we can get married. I'll send you a special invite, I already know your address as Billy had sent me letters the first month here. Don't worry, I'll use a different name, to make sure his dad doesn't block you from getting it."

"I-I'm not sure if it'll be possible for me to go. Neil would never allow me to take time out of school for a wedding. I wish I could, even just so I could come back here and tell Billy about it.". Max ducked her

head as she spoke, hating that tears were pricking at her eyes. God, she'd never felt like such a cry-baby until these past few months.

“Don't worry about it kid, I get it. I have firsthand experience about how much of a dick Neil Hargrove is.”. He gave her shoulder a squeeze as he passed, and it felt like a thread connecting Billy to this world was cut right before her eyes.

Nancy had never felt this lonely before. She had to watch Jonathan drive away, not knowing when exactly she'd next see him. She wasn't even sure when she'd be able to call him, he'd told her it could be up to two weeks before they can get a phone line connected. Steve was busy looking for jobs with his new best friend Robin and no way was she talking to Mike about her relationship woes. It was times like this she really missed Barb. She had no one left and she couldn't even blame it all on the Upside Down. She was the one who had pushed Steve away and though she doesn't regret choosing Jonathan, she does regret how she did it. She should have waited, properly talked things through with Steve and officially ended it before getting with Jonathon. Maybe if she had, she and Steve would have been able to maintain a friendship outside of life or death situations.

When she got home she could hear the banging of pots and pans in the kitchen, announcing her mum's presence. As she got closer, she could detect Frank Sinatra crooning from her mum's boombox, the volume on low, creating an atmosphere of elegance as she danced around the room. There was a waft of warm chocolate chip cookies that smelt heavenly to Nancy. Reminding her of being a little girl and baking with her mum, getting flour everywhere and sneaking scoops of the batter when she wasn't looking. Those times were long gone.

Watching her mum in her element, warmth spread within her. She'd become so caught up in being a teenager, dating and the Upside Down over the past few years that she had pushed her mum to the

back of her mind. Maybe Jonathon being gone would give her the opportunity to fix that. Especially as she has noticed that her mum has been acting slightly erratic lately, the numerous plates of different types of cookies and pastries she'd noticed as she stepped into the kitchen attesting to that. She had been doing that a lot lately, baking and cooking in overabundance until their fridge was close to bursting. Somehow, her dad barely noticed but that could be down to the fact that her mum was waiting on him hand and foot, he'd not even had to venture into the kitchen in over a month. He was obviously appreciative, she had never been quite this attentive before and he had begun to pay her more compliments, which she always accepted with a sheepish smile. It was great to see the two of them getting along so well but it left Nancy with a queasy feeling of unease, as she watched her mum become increasingly fussy and frazzled. It was driving her crazy that she couldn't pinpoint a cause for the shift in her behaviour.

The song came to an end and as she twirled one last time, she caught sight of Nancy and she quickly stopped and enveloped her in her arms. Feeling secure within the warm embrace, Nancy let a few tears slip down her cheeks.

"Oh, Nancy. Sweetheart. It's going to be ok. You'll be fine. You can still stay in touch, you could write him letters or call; don't worry about what your dad will say, I'll deal with him. Jonathan's a talented boy, I'm sure he's going to go far in life, as are you. The two of you are a great match and it's so obvious how in love with you he is.". Her mum suddenly pulled away, a serious expression taking over. "Don't ever settle for anything less than you are worth or you'll spend the rest of your life regretting it.".

It took Nancy a moment to comprehend what she had just heard before she was overwhelmed with despair. "M-Mum, do you regret having me? Having us?...Are we just what you've settled for?". The look of shame on her mum's face was only a small reprieve from the intensity of her sorrow.

"No! Oh, honey, no. I could never regret you! You kids are the best thing that ever happened to me. However, I can't deny that part of me regrets marrying your father and staying in this town. I had always hoped for more out of life than being another damn housewife

like my mother. I imagine you must feel the same about me.”. Her lips twitched into a small, sad smile. “I just don't want you to end up feeling trapped in a net of your own making, like me.”.

“If I end up being half the woman that you are then I'll feel accomplished. I'm sorry that I ever made you feel less than the amazing woman you are.”. Her mum was crying, shaking her head softly as she spoke.

“You wouldn't say that if you knew, about the things I've come so close to doing.”. Her mum stepped away, dropping hold of her hands and moving to stand behind the kitchen island.

“Mum, nothing you could ever tell me would make me think any less of you.”. Nancy tried to reach out to her, but she was waved off.

Her mum bit her lip, considering, before she closed her eyes and squared her shoulders. “I was going to sleep with Billy Hargrove.”.

There was a rushing in her ears, it was all she could hear. Nancy was sure she must have heard her wrong. There was no way she'd really just said she was going to sleep with Billy. Billy, who wasn't even a full year older than her, who'd died only months after turning eighteen. No. No way. There's no way her mother would try to sleep with a boy the same age as her child, who went to school with her. Nancy felt like she was free falling into an abyss. The world tilted beneath her.

“Nancy!”.

The shout from her mother sounded like it came from underwater. It felt like there was a thousand pins and needles throughout her whole body. The contact of her hands upon Nancy's arms, holding her up, felt disconnected. She flinched away without thinking and even through the distortion of the spinning room, she could see the hurt flash across her mother's face.

When she no longer felt like she was going to topple over, Nancy shoved herself away from her mother. “Don't touch me! I can't believe you! How could you? We were practically the same age!”.

“So much for not thinking any less of me.”. Her mother put her hands on her hips, like she was reprimanding her.

“Well, that was before I found out you were some kind of- some kind of predator!”. Nancy’s voice was loud and shrill in the quiet of the house, the Sinatra tape having reached its end during her fainting spell.

“How dare you call me that young lady! It wasn't like that! He was the one who instigated it!”.

Nancy scoffed. “Yeah, because what teenage boy wouldn't jump at the chance to sleep with an attractive older woman who kept flirting with him! Oh god, was that why you were at the public pool so often? What, to pant after him like a goddamned bitch in heat?”. The slap came as a surprise, the sound reverberating throughout the room and her cheek hot with pain.

“You don't get to judge me! You have no idea what it's like for me, to feel insignificant in my own life, in my marriage! For my kids to ignore me, only wanting me around to cook for them or give them money. For my husband to pay more attention to that damn television than me! I just wanted someone to appreciate me! I know it's hard for you to understand but it's not like you're little miss perfect either. One day you were with Steve and then the next you and Jonathan were the ones sneaking around to make out. I know what that means you did Nancy. Or do you think cheating doesn't matter if it's in the name of love? At least I couldn't go through with it!”. Her mother's voice had risen substantially as she spewed out a stream of long suppressed emotions. However, as her tirade came to an end, she deflated, and Nancy saw her shrink before her eyes.

“That was a low blow.”. Nancy swallowed, her throat thick with oncoming tears, she could already taste the saltiness on her tongue. “At least I'm not a mother whose actions could destroy a family. Did you even think about us? Or have we become so much of a burden that you just don't care anymore? Because from where I'm standing, I can't even recognise who you are anymore.”. She didn't wait for her mother to answer, to create more excuses. Ignoring her mother calling her name she stormed up to her room and began to pack a bag full of clothes.

Her mother appeared in her doorway, huffing from running up the stairs to catch up. "You guys are the reason I didn't do it. I got all dressed up, I'd even taken off my wedding ring, and was heading to the door when I noticed Holly and your dad asleep, her curled up on his lap. After seeing that, I couldn't go through with it. You kids are my life."

Nancy shoved the last of her things in the bag and spun to face her mother, blood boiling with fury. She wouldn't let her make her feel like shit when she was the one in the wrong. "If you really cared that much about this family, you would have never even considered sleeping with him!". She shouldered her way past, refusing to look back as she headed to the front door. She hoped to god that Steve wouldn't mind her staying at his for a few days. She didn't have anyone else anymore.

Max rolled to a stop outside of her house, a sense of apprehension overwhelming her. She hated being at home now. Well, not that she had ever really enjoyed being at home before either. Now, though, it felt like she was constantly walking on eggshells. It wasn't that she had had any actual altercations with Neil herself, but knowing what she does now, about how he had treated Billy and his mum, she can't help but be scared that one day she'd push him too far. That she wasn't sure her mum would save her from his temper, didn't help. The harsh reality was she no longer felt safe in her own home.

Luckily, no one paid her any attention as she walked in, beyond a grunt of acknowledgement from Neil where he sat in front of the tv with a beer in hand. She could hear her mum humming from inside the kitchen. They had gotten used to her burnt meals ever since Billy had died, because as much as his dad hated it, he had been the best cook out of all of them. Max decided to save talking to her mum for later and headed to the back of the house. However, instead of going to her room, she went to Billy's. She had been spending a lot of time

in his room, sometimes even sleeping there. It felt like a safe haven. The room was kept as he left it, except for her mum taking away dirty dishes and washing his clothes, that she had put straight back into his wardrobe once dry. Max had even kept the gross posters of half-naked women up, mostly because she didn't want to touch them. She wasn't sure why his room had been left alone by Neil, he made enough barbed comments about her spending time in it, that everything in it was just worthless crap and should be thrown out but somehow he still hadn't done it yet. Max wasn't going to take it for granted.

Max had been going through some of his things, picking out stuff to keep for herself. She'd already taken a few of his tapes, namely Metallica, some Scorpion, Aerosmith and an odd, plain tape, must be bootleg, with *Guns N' Roses 6/6/85 Troubadour* scrawled in chicken-scratch handwriting. Though, she had been surprised to find a few of Queen, mostly because she remembers how Neil had reacted upon hearing Freddy Mercury on the radio. Cursing about him being a 'disgusting fag' and an 'aids monkey'. Max had felt like throwing up hearing him go on and on, she had looked up and seen Billy with his jaw clenched and hands in fists by his side. Seeing him so worked up had astonished her, she had expected him to be agreeing, cheering his dad on as he spewed out hate. He had shown her a side of himself that night, that she hadn't known existed.

The other bits she had taken were some of his jewellery, namely his earrings. She was planning on piercing her ear like he had, a walking tribute. His pendant was already safely hidden in her room. He had been wearing it when he died and she hadn't thought about it until the next morning, when she was confronted with news footage of the fire. She had thought it meant it was lost forever, melted to his corpse by the fire. It had devastated her, his most prized possession gone up in flames, but then that morning Steve had taken her to one side and pulled the necklace from his pocket. Steve had told her that he had hated seeing how messed up she was over Billy and so when he heard they were going to set a fire, he'd asked the nearest soldier if they could get the necklace before they set it, that it would be a keepsake for Billy's little sister who just watched him die. They had been reluctant but did as asked and returned it to Steve before they all left. He'd told her he remembered that it was something he'd

never seen Billy take off, that it must have been special and so he didn't want to see it turned into soot.

Max was so thankful to Steve; he'd become a real rock to the Party after everything they had all been through together. He was great, though sometimes Max couldn't help but wish that she'd had the same relationship with Billy. That maybe if things had gone differently last year, if Billy had arrived a little earlier and seen the demodog, then maybe he would have helped them instead. They would have told him about the Upside Down, like with Steve, and he might have become better and been able to avoid getting possessed. That he could have lived. But that's not what happened, and Max knew better than to let herself drown in a fantasy. He was dead and she just had to deal with it. She still had Lucas – who was extra supportive recently – Dustin – though he had been spending a lot of his time with Steve or radioing Suzie – and Mike – who had become all moody again, though not as bad as when she first arrived here. Steve and Robin were older and were too busy to constantly hang out with a bunch of soon to be high school freshman, and Mike refused to hang out with his sister.

The smell of roast beef wafted in through the gap she had left in the doorway, so Max decided to offer her services in the hope it might stop their dinner from burning again. Trying not to draw attention or annoy Neil with the creaking of the floorboards, she did her best to walk softly and silently. This made it easy for her to be able to pick out Neil's voice from the direction of the kitchen.

“You've got to stop letting her spend so much time in that goddamned room! It's not right for a young lady like her to be spending so much time in a guy's room, god knows what disgusting shit he has hidden in there. Plus, it's not like he was worth all this mourning nonsense.”. The tone of his voice was bitter, and he spat out the words like venom. There was a loud clink and Max imagined he must have slammed his beer bottle down, alongside the growing pile of empty ones that seemed to have become a permanent fixture. “Get her to stop going into his room by next Friday, or I'll drag her out kicking and screaming and make her watch as I burn all his crap.”. He continued, low and menacing.

“No. I've had it with these threats, you're going to leave that room

alone and let Max go in and out as she pleases. It might not mean much to you that your son is dead, but he was Max's brother. Her real brother. Unless you've forgotten all those times that, whilst your wife was at home looking after your four year old son, you would sneak off to meet me in some cheap motel and refuse to wear a condom because you were always so sure you'd be able to pull out in time. Well, look where that got us, me convincing my ex-husband that he was the one who knocked me up and having to marry him. I'm sure it would go over great for you, if people were to find out Max is your bastard daughter from an affair. So, you'll let Max mourn her brother, because she'll never get to be with Billy as not just steps-siblings, but real ones.”.

This was the strongest her mum had ever sounded when talking to Neil but unfortunately, Max couldn't celebrate the moment of empowerment because she was too busy feeling like she was dying. She couldn't focus on what else was being said, when her heart was racing really fast, as if it would burst from her chest at any moment and she was finding it really hard to breathe. Even with all that though, she knew that she had to move, that if she got caught eavesdropping then she'd be in for a world of trouble. She stumbled her way back to Billy's room, miraculously avoiding the creaky parts and fully shutting the door this time before sinking to the ground. She sat there with her head on her knees, gasping for breath and tears streaming down her face. *Billy was her brother, by blood? Her real brother? Oh god. Oh god oh god oh god.* That was all that was going through her head. *Why now? Why did she have to find out now? When he was already dead.*

Max wasn't sure how long she had been sat there but no one had come knocking on the door, demanding she come out for dinner, so it can't have been for that long. Her thoughts were a mess, couldn't seem to choose between being angry that they could keep this from her, from them, to hating Billy for not being a better brother and feeling crushed that he would never know. It was so unfair. Wiping away the tears and ignoring the shaking of her hands, Max tried to compose herself. She couldn't leave the room looking a mess, it would just attract Neil's ire. Huddled as she was on the floor, her head was level with the bottom of Billy's bed and after the blur of unshed tears faded, Max noticed something stuck between the slats of

his bed frame.

The rational side of her said that it was probably something she didn't want to see but her curiosity won out. Pulling it out from where it had been hidden, Max realised it was an envelope and a pretty full one at that. Taking a deep breath, she moved to sit on his bed and tipped the contents onto the duvet. “*Shit!*” she breathed, as she saw the roll of cash that fell out. Taking a closer look, it had to be at least \$200. There were also a few polaroid photos, some regular printed photos and folded up pieces of paper. Picking up one of the prints, she saw it was a photo of Max and Billy relaxing on the beach, she wasn't even aware a picture had been taken. There was another one of her, a copy of one her mother had put in the family album, of Max blowing out candles that declared her thirteen. Neil and her mum were beside her in it, Billy had been the one taking it, a fairly common occurrence. The last two photos were of a young boy and a blonde woman, that must be Billy when he was younger with his mum. Looking at the little boy grinning at the camera, Max struggled to associate him with the older version of Billy, but it was difficult; she'd never seen him as happy as he was in the photos. All that was left to look at was the folded pieces of paper but as she opened one up and saw ‘Dear Billy’ at the top, she couldn't go through with reading them. He deserved some privacy still. As she went to put everything back, she noticed there were still two wallet sized photos stuck inside. When she pulled them out, the first one she saw was the ice cream photo Luther had mentioned, but it was the second that shocked her. It was Steve. *Why would Billy have a picture of Steve?*

Determined, Max shoved everything into the envelope and went to fetch some of her clothes, taking it with her. She jammed whatever she could find into her backpack, deciding to grab Billy's pendant at the last moment. When she walked into the front of the house, Neil was back to watching tv and her mum was still in the kitchen, so she headed there.

“Mum, I completely forgot, I'm supposed to be at a sleepover. A girl from school invited me. So, I'm going to go now! I'll see you later this week, can't be sure when since we'll be having so much fun!”. She didn't wait to hear her answer, just rushed out the door, grabbing her board as she passed, and started the journey to Steve's. She needed

answers.

The incessant ringing of his doorbell was drilling into Steve's skull. He and Robin had stayed up late the night before, drinking bottles of his mother's red wine in celebration of finally getting jobs. Even if it had taken a lot of persuasion on Robin's part to get him hired as well. They'd gotten really drunk and Robin had become all giggly talking about the girl's she's had crushes on. Steve didn't really know most of them, but one stood out. His face must have been hilarious after Robin told him her first kiss had been with Barb Holland, one day after band practise, because she'd become hysterical and ended up sobbing because she couldn't stop laughing. He'd thought that Barb might have been, well, like Robin but didn't ever bring it up to Nancy. Then Barb died and it just felt wrong.

"She had been in love with Nancy, you know?". Robin had said, suddenly a lot more sober and sombre. "Barb loved her, and she knew Nancy would never love her back, but she never tried to find someone else. For her, being her friend was enough, but she always feared what Nancy would think if she knew. Barb confessed to me that sometimes she felt like Nancy was only her friend because when people looked at them together, it made Nancy look better.". Robin had curled up to Steve and he'd wrapped his arm around her and pretended he hadn't seen the tears in her eyes. "You know I don't like Nancy, especially after all I've heard from you about how she treated you. She's manipulative, judgemental and so very self-absorbed but I can understand how for you, and Barb, she made you feel wanted in ways you hadn't been before. But it doesn't excuse how she treated you. She made you feel like an idiot Steve, and you are not an idiot.". Robin had also pretended not to notice the tears in his eyes.

Steve didn't know how he felt about Nancy. He'd spent so long pining after her, that his life had felt empty without her but then he met Robin and it brought back some light into it. With Robin though,

came her examinations of his life and consequently, his relationship with Nancy. He'd told her she had made him feel like he meant something, could *be* something, and it had left along with her. Robin had interrupted to say when she had cheated and Steve hadn't corrected her, he couldn't bring himself to argue against it. She'd told him he didn't need Nancy to tell him he was worth something, that all the changes he'd made to make him who he was now, was because of him and not Nancy. That she loved who he had become. Hearing that from Robin had lifted a weight off his shoulders that he didn't even realise was there. So, when he opened his door to find Nancy on his doorstep, he had slammed the door in her face.

There was a moment of stunned silence, in which Steve's heart started beating double time, until there was a thunderous round of knocks and Nancy screaming his name.

"Jesus! What the hell is going on? I thought I heard a herd of goddamn elephants stomping through here.". Robin paused to listen to the loud banging and shouting, before continuing. "Is that little miss Nancy Wheeler? What's she doing here?."

"I have no idea. Didn't ask...I just slammed the door in her face.".

"Oooh, damn Stevie! Didn't know you had it in you, Dingus.". She bumped her hip against his as she came to stand beside him, and he rolled his eyes at her.

"What, knocking out a Russian guard with a phone wasn't enough proof that, I, am the man.". All he got in response was a choked laugh and a slap on the shoulder.

"You keep telling yourself that. Now, what do we do about her?.". Robin said, nodding her head at the door. Steve sighed and approached the door tentatively. Taking a deep breath, he swung the door open.

"Hey, Nance, what are you doing here?.". Nancy just glared at him, her arms crossed and a bulging bag hanging from her elbow.

"What the hell was that Steve? You're shutting the door in my face now?.". Steve was already feeling like he was being admonished. He

hated it.

"You know what, this is exactly why I slammed the door. You constantly find things to complain about me, make me feel small and stupid. Everything is my fault, all the time, in your eyes but the truth is that you just can't accept that you're not perfect. Yeah, I was a dick when we first got together but I changed because I wanted to be good enough for you, but it never made a difference. No one will ever truly be good enough for you, Nancy, because you just can't accept when things don't go your way. The biggest joke is that you got so mad at me for accusing you of cheating but that's exactly what you did only one year later.". Adrenalin was coursing through his veins, his blood singing. He felt powerful, but as he looked into Nancy's glistening eyes, he just felt cruel. "Look, Nancy, I care about you. I do. You're smart, brave and a complete badass but I'm done pretending you didn't hurt my feelings, just to spare yours.". The tears were no longer just a wash in her eyes but now overflowing. Nancy sniffled and wiped them, turning her face away from him. Steve felt awful but he knew it had to be said. Stepping forward, he held his arms open for her to step into them and after a moment's hesitation, she clung to him.

"I'm sorry Steve. I realised I never properly said that to you. I'm sorry I hurt you and that I ever made you feel like shit. It's just the idea of not being in control is something that has always scared me and since I found out about the Upside Down, I think I've been trying even harder to make sure I can control every other aspect of my life. The truth is, I stayed with you because being with you made my life feel predictable and easy to control, that you were a safe option. That was wrong of me, because I wasn't thinking about what you wanted, about your feelings, I was only thinking of mine.". Nancy looked up at Steve and the part of him that was still kind of in love with her, ached but not for her. For himself, because it was everything he'd been afraid of, admitted to him by her.

"You never loved me Nancy, only the idea of me. I've come to accept that. All I ask is that you try to learn that you can't control everything, that you might miss out on a lot if you keep trying to.". Steve gave her a peck on the forehead before letting go and stepping back. He glanced at Robin since she had been suspiciously quiet, but

she was smiling proudly at him. He knocked their shoulders, smiling back.

“When did you become so mature? I guess I missed that. I know it's a lot to ask, especially after everything that was just said, but do you think I could stay here for a few days? I just can't be at home right now.”. Nancy let out a short laugh, but it sounded closer to a sob.

“Sure, Nance, you're welcome here any time you need it, ok?”. He said, voice and expression softening.

“Thanks. You're a great guy, you'll make someone really happy someday.”. Steve thought he saw Nancy's gaze flick to Robin quickly but figured he must have imagined it. She stepped inside and that made Steve realise he'd essentially ambushed her in his entryway.

“Yeah, he's a real catch with the ladies. Got a lot of dates at Scoops. Though, they were all over 70.”. Steve glanced at Robin; she really couldn't help herself. Upon seeing his expression, she burst out laughing and ruffled his bed hair.

“Jeez, thanks Robin, way to make a guy feel good.”.

Steve told Nancy to leave her things in one of the spare bedrooms, whilst he went to put pizza rolls in the oven. As Nancy walked into the kitchen, the doorbell rang again, and Steve let out a big sigh.

“That better not be Henderson, I'm way too hungover for him right now.”. Robin's voice followed him as he answered the door. As soon as the door was open even slightly, he felt a harsh push from the other side and Max came barging in.

Max spun to face him, the red of her hair and her fiery expression making her appear like a vengeful goddess. “I'm staying here for a few days.”.

“Uh, excuse me, shithead, but don't I get a say in this. This is my house.”. Steve remarked as he slammed the door shut. The only reply he got was a sound no.

“Well then, at this rate, might as well invite everyone over for a sleepover.”. Steve only meant it as a sarcastic comment, but Max was

already heading to the phone, shouting out "great idea" as she went. With a sigh he dropped into the seat by Robin, waiting for the pizza rolls to buzz. Well, there goes his chances of a peaceful next few days.

One moment El was watching the landscape through her window pass by in a blur, the next she was opening her eyes to a deep black nothingness. She jerked up from where she had been laying, feeling the movement of water against her but unable to sense any type of temperature. The darkness was cloying, like it was crawling down her throat, trying to drown her. Everything was so familiar but not at the same time, the void she knew felt safe, like an extension of herself. This void felt hostile, it robbed her of her senses and left her terrified. She was chilled to her very core, the only time the void had ever turned on her was when the Mind Flayer had baited her into searching for it. Goose bumps rose on the nape of her neck and she saw flashes of Will touching the back of his and whispering, "He's here", but it couldn't be. They had killed it. *I am dreaming*, El thought, *scared of being gone and unable to protect them*. She closed her eyes, hoping to wake up now. Instead, when she opened her eyes, she didn't see the inside of the moving van but of a figure huddled in the distance, glowing like a beacon. Her stomach dropped and heart jumped into her throat. She felt paralysed with fear. Whoever it was, they shouldn't be here, El hadn't been searching for anyone. No one was supposed to be able to enter here without her. Her breath was becoming shallow and her hands were beginning to shake. She felt powerless. She *was* powerless, earlier she hadn't even been able to make a teddy bear move, so what good was she in a fight against an unknown enemy.

El crawled backwards slowly, trying not to draw it's attention, even though her movements made no sound. She didn't dare take her eyes away from it, but she needed to see if there was anything else lurking around her. There was still only the bleak nothingness and the figure

before her. El could feel whimpers slip from between her lips, lost in the vacuum of this black hole. She just wanted to get out of here, but it was looking more like that would be impossible. Unless...she touched it? Maybe if she did, it would disappear like Mike always had last year, and she'd finally be free from this hell. It was her only chance, she had nothing to lose that being trapped here wouldn't take anyway. So, she inched her way towards it, each step cautious, and as she got closer she realised that the figure was male. His head was shaved and tucked between his knees. Something caught her eye on the back of his head, so she tilted her head to get a better look and to her horror, she saw numbers burned into his skin. 0147. Unconsciously, she had begun to rub her own number, body tense with a strong sense of foreboding. Across her vision flashed memories of the lab and Papa. Shaved head. Like hers.

El stumbled back, scrambling to create some distance between them. The rapid beating of her heart reverberated in her head. She must have closed her eyes, but they felt like lead, weighing them down as she tried to open them. Panic was tearing at her insides, her mind racing with theories of how he may be connected to the lab but just kept coming back to Papa, that he was still alive. She was gasping for breath now, there was no way she could handle it if he was, she was too weak to fight back now. *Wait...*she no longer had her powers. If Papa was back it wouldn't matter, she has nothing to offer him anymore. Some of the panic receded but the rest hadn't forgotten the man who waited beyond her eyelids. Taking a steadying breath, she managed to drag her eyes open, only to be met with cobalt blue ones.

El was even more sure she must be dreaming now, because the figure before her was Billy. The Billy that was Max's stepbrother and who had died right in front of her, so close his blood had splattered across her cheek. At least, it looked like Billy, but this version was gaunt, with deep shadows beneath his eyes that looked dark and haunted. El wasn't sure why she'd dream about a Billy like this, when the last thought she'd had about him was that she hoped he was happy now. His gaze was unfocused, and she felt emboldened enough to venture closer to him.

"Billy?" she breathed, forgetting momentarily that she wouldn't be heard. With a tentative hand, she reached out to lay it on his

forearm, taking note of the black veins that slithered up his skin. Before her palm touched him, his other arm shot out suddenly and grabbed her wrist in a punishing grip. She let out a silent scream, her wide, petrified eyes swinging up to meet his now sharp gaze.

“You. You did this!”. Hearing his voice after the hellish silence was painful to her ears. It was very rough, like he had lost it after screaming for hours, she could recognise the pain in it from her cries for help at the lab. His grip got tighter and she could feel her bones rubbing together in excruciating pain. She just kept screaming and screaming but no sound came out. Until he became lost in the darkness again.

El lurched awake, a wail on the tip of her tongue, but was yanked back by the seatbelt across her chest. She held onto it firmly, using it to anchor her back to reality. She looked to Joyce, seeing her lips moving but deaf to her words. It took a few moments before her hearing came back and she was able to make out what Joyce was saying.

“It's ok, sweetie, it was just a bad dream. Just a dream. You're fine, you're safe. We're in the van, still got a fair way to go yet. Just sit back and relax, okay? Try not to fall asleep again for a while, don't want you having another nightmare.”. Joyce's voice was heavenly, soothing the lingering ache in her ears. She rested her hand on El's knee and gave it a quick squeeze in reassurance before she put it back on the wheel, having swerved a little too far to the left.

Just a dream. A bad dream. Nightmare. El hoped that was all it was.

3. Into the Void

[A/N: This chapter includes description of torture and experimentation, though I wouldn't say its that detailed. Constructive criticism is more than welcome. This isn't my favourite chapter, but it was the most difficult to write so far. Its a shorter chapter at least, though there is no dialogue, a warning for those who aren't keen on pieces without it]

It felt like he would never be warm again. The cold had seeped into his bones and moulded itself to every inch of him. Frozen from within, like death. He was a dead man walking. The only indication that Billy wasn't really dead was the methodical beating of his heart inside the quiet of his mind. It was like someone had slowed down the tempo, each beat not hitting as fast as it used to; even when they came to drag him away, it remained steady in its slowness. He knew he was wrong now, that the lack of an erratic heartbeat even when he was terrified, was abnormal. Inhuman. He only had to look at the black veins that crawled up his arms, to know that he would always be a monster now. That he always was one.

Time didn't exist for him anymore. He wasn't even sure exactly how much time had passed since he first woke up in this room. Jolted awake, his whole body screaming out in pain alongside his voice. The cool touch of metal on his left wrist, the chain just long enough to reach the crapper opposite the metal bench of a bed. When he realised his hair was gone, he had cried for what felt like hours, but he can't be sure. Only recalled he had been branded when he ran his hands over his now smooth head as the tears fell, the pain of it had just merged with everything else to become an all-encompassing agony. He had begun to count the days as a new one each time the soldiers came for him. Not when they delivered food, as food didn't always mean a new day. They would sometimes reward him with two meals or punish him with none. He could handle punishment, was very familiar with it and withholding food was the oldest trick in the book. On the other hand, being rewarded made him feel uneasy, questioning what exactly he was being used for. The thought that he

is once again just a prisoner who might be being used to kill people without knowing how or why, the guilt of it ate him alive. He had nothing left but this metal cage and his memories, stained black with recent events.

The place they always took him to seemed to be the only area of this rusty metal monstrosity that is his prison, with actual lights bright enough to function under. They didn't leave a sickly yellow tinge to everything they touched but part of him feels like everything would be better if the lights weren't different. That way, the sight of his crimson blood stark against the white tiles would be less disturbing, that he could pretend it was drops of anything else. However, those red splatters felt insignificant after the first time they made a cut over one of those dark veins and out poured inky black ichor. He'd panicked upon seeing that, thrashing about so much he nearly undid his restraints, until they sedated him. That had been a punishment day. He couldn't understand their motives but knew they could only be sinister, for them to be making incisions on his body and just watching the blood create lakes upon his skin. Listening to them did no good either, they only spoke English when giving him orders and sometimes not even then, barking at him in a language he couldn't understand and only guessed at being Russian. Each new day in that room, the smiles on the men in stained white coats grew bigger, and only on the 19th day did he understand why. The cuts were bleeding less. By day 26, the cuts were beginning to visibly heal only a couple hours after being made. They had been ecstatic on that day and he had been rewarded with three meals for the first time.

His blood wasn't the only thing they seemed to be fascinated by. Some days, they fasten electrodes to his temples and place a weird helmet on his head, then they'd give him random shocks, varying the voltage. He's not sure how high it went but it had to be too high, one particular shock had made him feel like his brain was melting and blood had poured from his nose, even spotting from his ears. These days were the ones he mostly got punished for, whatever it is that they wanted from the tests, he's not been giving it to them. He hates that he hopes he can give them what they want, but knows if he continues to not do so, to become useless, would be a death sentence. Especially, as he's not the only one they have around to use as test subjects. He can hear them screaming often enough. Though, he

seems to be the one taken the most.

The time he spent being experimented on was, surprisingly, the most preferable part of the day. Outside of that, he would either spend the rest of the day isolated in his cell, with only his thoughts and his increasingly hazy memories, or the guards would use him to alleviate their boredom. Sometimes, they would shove him into a fenced off area alongside another prisoner and make them fight like feral dogs, brandishing their guns so that they understood what disobedience would get them. Billy may have been a cocky bastard, but he knew how to obey, had years of experience in submitting to male authority figures. The key was to make himself look smaller, even if he was bigger, so as not to make them feel challenged. His opponents were always too scared to put up much of a fight anyway, their bodies too scrawny and underweight. Billy had also lost weight; it was inevitable trapped here as he was and given nothing more to eat than slop on a tray. However, he had begun to notice that rather than feeling weaker as time went on, he was only getting stronger. He put it down to whatever shit they would occasionally inject him with, not wanting to consider the implications of it all. Mostly, he didn't want to think at all. He just wanted to win, since losing meant death.

Alone in his cell, the lights dim and the tang of metal in the air, it sent him back to that dank basement at the steel factory. Hearing that thing breathing in the dark, the alien grumble it made as it shifted. Watching it grow bigger as it led scores of rats to their deaths and absorbing their exploded remains. Remembers feeling and seeing all the people he had brought to it, sacrifice themselves as their bodies melted to become mortar for its construction. To be the only one left alive, to know it had plans for him. Connected to it as he was, a passenger in his own body, it had shown him its memories. He saw the world it came from, a hideous replica of Hawkins where everything living looked dead. The grotesque creatures that haunted it, but fell to their knees before him, before it. It had made him feel powerful in the beginning and a small, dark part of him revelled in it. All he had ever wanted was to feel powerful enough to fight back but even with all that power, he had failed to. The worst parts of his life had been magnified under that things control, any sense of freedom crushed beneath its rotting weight. He wasn't just some angry kid anymore, lashing out at others because he couldn't do anything

against the one person he wanted to. He was a murderer now.

Billy could handle the abuse from the soldiers, when they'd strike him with their guns for not obeying fast enough, or for no real reason other than they could. He could take the scientists doing tests and shocking him, at least it left him too out of it to feel anything afterwards. Being left in his cell though, that was the ultimate torture for him. He had always been the type who hated being stuck inside for too long, much preferred surfing, partying or just going for a drive. If he had to be stuck inside, he'd at least make sure he got something good out of it, like sex, but here he had nothing but his mind and the cold four walls that surrounded him, with no window to see beyond them. He hated quiet, always made sure he had music blasting, so he'd never be left alone in it, but here, his heartbeat was often the loudest sound in the room. The screams of the other prisoners nothing but white noise now, similar to how he'd gotten so used to the sounds of the city that he no longer heard them but after they moved, everything seemed so quiet in comparison. Sometimes, he would scream until he couldn't anymore, just to break the silence.

To try and push away the dark thoughts that have taken root in his mind, Billy tried to relive his somewhat happy memories, of surfing whilst his mum watched, or taking Max to the beach. Reminisce those few months before everything went to shit in July, when they had been like real siblings. The longer he was here, though, the more those memories decayed. Instead, memories from that thing and his whilst under its control, became the most prominent, the details sharper. There were even memories from someone else that had been passed along to him; he could vaguely recognise Max's friends within them, Creep Byers and his mum crying before him, so they must be from that sickly-looking kid Byers. The memories were never just flashes of images in his mind, it was like he was inside them, feeling everything, he did. When he re-lived the burning of the tunnels by the men in contamination suits, he felt the flames licking at his own skin and he had writhed in agony, only able to see that boy – Mike? - looking down at him with fear evident in every pore.

There was something growing within him. Not something physical but solely within his mind, though it felt like he could touch it. It felt like blank nothingness yet everything, all at once. It writhed and

pulsed, responding the most to the days they used the electrodes and shocks, his vision swimming with black, like it was trying to drag him down into the dark depths but each time he clawed his way out of its grasp. A living darkness that was terrifyingly familiar. Started out as a prick on the edge of his consciousness, but the more tests they did, the stronger it became. Until, by day 35, he fell into its darkness.

Opening his eyes into utter darkness, sent Billy into a panic. The lack of sound and the nothingness within its depths, so reminiscent of *Its* presence in his mind, that he feared he had been possessed all over again. It never spoke but he could just feel what it wanted, or it would conjure up images in his mind. Hallucinations, like Heather telling him to take her to it. It melded itself so completely to him that his every thought was heard by it, giving it more ammunition and making it easier for it to blend into the rest of his life. During his possession he had learnt that it hated that little girl, El, because she had trapped it in its own world. However, it remained connected to this world through a part of it that got left behind, that watched them, biding its time and growing stronger. It had watched them and chose him, because he was close enough for easier access to the girl but distant enough that no one would notice any changes in his behaviour. That night it took him might have been a case of wrong place, wrong time but it was always going to get him. It told him that he would become its ultimate host, ready for when it no longer needed the body it built to destroy the little girl.

Billy wandered in the darkness, feeling water splash beneath his feet but no sound was created. It felt endless, like he could walk forever and never stop. He felt insignificant within its vastness. It was disturbing to look down and see himself lit like a spotlight, but any light ceased to exist beyond the reach of his fingers. That all his senses worked double time just to find something they could identify but unable to. Nothing but darkness and silence. Panic tore at his chest, he felt completely and utterly trapped. He couldn't breathe, choking out gasps as tears collected on the edges of his lashes. He would never be able to escape this darkness; it had lived within him his whole life, and now it consumed him. The air felt heavy and tight, squeezing what little life was left, from his body.

Billy collapsed to his knees, laying his forehead against the ground,

feeling waves of water lap against his skin, the lack of temperature made it feel like he was floating. He curled his hands against his skull, digging in his nails until he broke skin. With his eyes shut, images of a young girl with hair like fire and eyes like the ocean, overwhelmed him. "M-Max" he sobbed, tears overflowing as he curled up into himself. Of course, it was Max, but something was wrong. The visions of her weren't quite right, her features not quite as he thought they should be. The longer he watched them, the more of a stranger she became. *No, no no no*, Billy pleaded inside, *don't do this to me! Please! Don't take her away from me too!* His memories of his mother had already faded to the point he knew he'd be unable to recognise her anymore. It hasn't been long enough for the same to be happening to his memories of Max, but then he had already started to forget her during the possession. She had been turned into just another body in the way of getting the girl.

There was a sudden ripple against his scalp and Billy froze. Even if he had moved, he shouldn't have felt the water hit his head from that angle, that meant it came from something in front of him. He slowly raised his head, noticing the frame of his old bed first, then the red check covers that had been on it last time he'd sat on it. His eyes widened, mouth falling open with a gasp of "Max!" as he saw her cross legged on his bed, sobbing into his leather jacket. This couldn't be a memory; she was never allowed in his room and she knew better than to test him. Plus, she would never have cried into his jacket like that before. He hadn't considered what him being a prisoner here must seem like to those back in Hawkins, if they thought he was dead or not. Watching this hallucination of Max cry on his bed, he felt crushed by guilt. How she could cry for someone like him, he didn't know, could only regret not being a better brother. He reached out an unsteady hand to touch her, but she disappeared in a billow of smoke. "No!" he screamed, turning quickly into howls of anguish. His body felt like it was being ripped apart, and he was yanked from the darkness into blinding light. The shock of it proved too much for his brain to handle, and he lost consciousness to the excited chatter of the scientists that encircled him.

His venture into the darkness had apparently shown a huge reading of psychic activity and Billy was subjected to numerous more tests trying to replicate the results. They thought starving him for a few

days would weaken his defences enough that he would be sucked back into it again, but nothing happened. The lack of results made everyone agitated and the soldiers became increasingly violent. By day 40, they had taken to holding his head under freezing water, bringing him to the edge of consciousness and then punching him to bring him back. He didn't understand the obsession with that place, it had been nothing but himself and his hallucinations, but they wouldn't let it go.

On day 50, they strapped him down to the table in the lab, with the lights glaring down on him, and locked him in, all alone for what must have been an entire day. He couldn't move and had been forced to soil himself. Being stuck in there, surrounded only by white walls, white tiles and bright white lights, that seared into his brain. Noise barely penetrated the room and it felt like he was back in that void space, but instead of being drowned in shadows, he was engulfed in light. The only time someone came in, it had been just to secure his head so he couldn't move it, stuck only able to stare at the ceiling until he became blind to anything but whiteness. When he was eventually released, it felt like he was seeing for the first time, multi-coloured spots dancing across his vision. He was left in a mess of confusion for days afterward, unable to focus on anything for more than a few seconds.

He was only ever referred to as prisoner 0147 and he eventually responded to it like it was second nature. One guard in particular, had taken a sadistic interest in him, he seemed to know more English than the other guards and would constantly insult him when he was on shift. He always hit the hardest, with a twisted smirk, the coldness in his gaze reminding him of his father. Billy had taken to calling him Shark in his head. When the guards were ordered to torture him in order to test how well he was able to heal himself, Shark had been the one to get up real close to him and drag a knife across his collarbone. He and the other guards must have spent hours beating him, breaking and re-breaking his fingers when they healed. The worst part had been when he had dug his knife into Billy's right bicep and skinned his tattoo from him, not only because of the absolute agony of the act, but that his skin will heal but the tattoo wouldn't.

All the time he had been here, Billy hasn't been able to see himself

beyond distorted reflections in the steel fixtures and water. The loss of his hair, when it had been years since he'd had it shorter than his chin, as wearing it longer reminded him of his mother. Now with the removal of his tattoo, it was hard to imagine what he must look like now, let alone remember what he looked like before. He'd lost so much of himself even before he was kidnapped, stuck in a town where he had no freedom or friends, constantly watched over by his dad's eagle eyes. The most defining parts of him snatched away or forced to be hidden. Now those parts felt even further away from him, and as the distance grew larger, his sense of self was vanishing.

They moved him to a new cell on the 50th day, a white room like the lab. The lights were even the same as well, and they were left on at all times. After four days, he was begging for them to be turned off, the brightness blinding and making it impossible to sleep. He was ignored, of course, and all that ended up happening was they took away his clothes and replaced them with white ones. Everything was white, it was all he could see or even think about. It made his eyes burn and rage boil. Until he snapped on about day 65 - he had started to lose track. He threw himself against the door, his head hitting the painted metal a few times and leaving bloody streaks. Roaring with anger as he smashed his body against it, in an irrational bid for freedom. Until he collapsed to the floor with a broken shoulder and chest heaving with sobs. He continued to scream until his throat was aflame and he was spitting blood. However, after Shark popped his head in to rub it in that he'd never escape alive, that he'd end up killing himself if they didn't kill him first, his mind had gone blank with fury. Next thing he knew, the wall was cracking under his fist. The expression on Shark's face alone was more than satisfying, but the rush of power he felt in his veins was enlightening. So caught up in the euphoric feeling, he hadn't noticed the other guards who came running, tackling him to the ground and managing to sedate him.

When he regained consciousness, he was still in his cell but now had thick, heavy, metal clamps on his arms. He couldn't move them, they were pressed so tightly to his chest. The clamps were only ever taken off in the lab, in his cell they remained, and he had to be constantly monitored. Shark was the most common monitor and it was so degrading when he had to have his fucking assistance just to wipe his arse, or even hold his dick so he could pee straight, especially when it

was accompanied by jabs at his size or masculinity. At least the fucker didn't have to spoon feed him, they just watered down the slop and he drank it with a straw. In the lab, they took the clamps off and made him lift weights to measure this new strength he seemed to have. So far, he'd managed to lift 500kg and only been huffing a little bit, leaving him with such a rush, only for it to be ruined when the clamps were put back on.

To escape from the glaring reality of his surroundings, he focused his attention on going back into the darkness, wanting to swap one extreme for the other. He couldn't cope, they'd been leaving him in his cell for longer than before, making it even more difficult to track the passing days; but when taking him from one place to another, they'd blindfolded him so that all he ever really saw was the blinding lights. Light that was consuming him, his mind becoming increasingly just a blank white space. The only thing of any substance left inside his mind was that pulsing mess of nothing. It didn't work, just left him in agony as his head felt like it was being crushed.

Until one day, he was taken to the lab but instead of being strapped down, he was submerged in a chamber full of water and made to wear thick opaque glasses and earplugs. Floating, senseless, like he was in the void. He's not sure how long he was left there, but he had long lost his voice, when that writhing part of his mind seemed to spread, creeping across the space in his head until it overtook everything. It swallowed him whole and he rested in the darkness of its stomach. He was aware he was still floating in that chamber, but he was also walking through that black space, except this time the air was freezing. There was a prickly feeling at the back of his neck, causing goose bumps to rise, like he was being watched. The darkness seemed to shift around him, cracks appearing and letting in sparks of colour. He reached his hand out to touch one and he felt a tug on his arm, before he was pulled through it. On the other side, he saw a swirling red sky and decaying vines. Before him, stood his house but the paint that Susan has meticulously applied, was flaking and stained with dark smudges. It looked abandoned.

An image of a phone booth flashed before his eyes and the phantom feel of flames dancing across his skin. His heart clenched as he realised that he recognised where he was, what else was here. He

slowly walked backwards from his porch, he didn't want to turn around, just kept his eyes glued to the front door. The pulsing in his head grew stronger, turning into a loud humming. Wincing in pain, the crawling sensation down his spine intensified as he felt a phantom presence looming behind him. Swallowing, he spun to face it, dread pooling in the pit of his stomach. There it stood, hulking form towering above the dead tree line, a shadowy mass that moved in fluid waves. The air was thick with the putrid scent of death and there were distant growls that grew louder as they approached.

Hunched figures crept from the depths of the shadow. He was petrified watching the grotesque, flower-headed creatures move closer. A searing pain began at the base of his skull and spread to the forefront of his head, a tug from his stomach making him nauseous. Sharp pinpricks ran throughout his body, nearly dragging him down to his knees but he fought to stay standing. One lone creature prowled closer to him, standing just a few inches away. He daredn't even breathe, going lightheaded as he waited for it to lunge at him. Shockingly, instead of opening its head and devouring him, it lowered it until it was level with his waist. For a few minutes nothing happened, but he was sure he could feel hundreds of those things watching and waiting for him to make a move. Morbid curiosity had him reaching out a cautious hand and lightly placing it on the creature's head. As his palm lay flat, a trill sounded from all around him. Before he could move away, a shooting pain stemmed from his spine and spread throughout him, his body feeling like it was tearing apart. His eyes clouded with darkness and rolled backwards as he fell into the void again.

He shot up with a choked gasp, thrashing in the water. He ripped the goggles from his face and came face to face with the slimy, grey head of the creature from the other world. Eyes opening wide, he let out a deafening shriek and rushed to pound on the chamber door. It was yanked open within a few seconds and he scrambled out, slipping on the tiles and falling to the ground. Confused, broken English followed his actions, until one of the scientists glanced into the chamber and noticed the creature. With a yell, they slammed the door shut, just as it leapt towards them. The room was silent except for the banging coming from inside the chamber, until he was yanked up by two of the guards, the motion causing intense pain to ignite his nerves.

Everyone was staring at him. The realisation that that place wasn't just in his head, a hallucination, it was real. As real as the creature he'd just brought back with him. *Shit*.

Days passed after the incident; they had locked the creature down in the basement after shooting it full of tranquillisers. Ever since, he'd been shoved back into that chamber and told to do it all over again, but the closest he got was that empty black space, with a pounding head. Each time he was dragged out of the water, it was with rivulets of blood coming from his nose, the experience of travelling there becoming more painful. They hauled him down to the basement to face the monster, probably hoping a good mauling would kick-start the journey back to the other side. However, it only watched him, tilting its head whenever he moved. So instead, they made him watch as they yanked another prisoner down, screaming like a banshee, and shoved him into its cage before releasing the creature so it could gorge itself on him. The knowledge that it was all real motivated him to try even harder to travel back to the darkness, when he was alone in his cell, away from their monitor devices. Days and days of trying, growing weaker each time until he could barely move from the pain. He must have seemed so pathetic that they even removed the clamps. Left curled up on the floor in agony, as the scientists focused their attention on studying the creature. Until finally, around day 92, he opened his eyes to a little girl staring down at him. The girl with the bloodied nose and black eyes as she locked that *thing* away. The reason it chose him.

4. Revelations

[A/N: Sorry that I'm a week late with updating, I had an essay due and am trying to find a job, also struggled getting started with chapter 4, now chapter 5. Unfortunately, I'm still writing it but decided to upload this as a kind of mini chapter to tide over til its done. This originally was the first part to chapter 4. Oh, and at the end I've added my attempt at sketching Billy, if you want to check it out...warning, not very good haha]

The house felt abandoned in the silence left after the last of the Party left. Robin was hungover and trying to sleep it off upstairs. She had gotten into a huge fight last night with Nancy, after apparently catching her glaring at her as she turned around. Robin had confronted her, and she had replied, saying she wasn't sure of her *intentions*, especially as she and Steve hadn't even been friends before the summer. It had sent Robin into a rage, screaming at her that it's none of her business anymore, she doesn't get to dictate who he gets to be friends with just because she doesn't like them. Hearing that had made him think of Tommy, though he didn't regret standing up to him and calling him out on his *bullshit*, he does partly wish that things had ended differently, since he had been his best friend from the age of 5. That after it all went down, he was left with only Nancy and once she was gone, then only Dustin, until Robin came along recently. The two of them had kept at it for hours, going into separate spaces for awhile before just crashing together again. The kids had just stayed out of their way, switching between the pool and watching films they had forced him to rent; being their rowdy selves and throwing popcorn at each other, leaving a mess he'll have to spend today cleaning up. After Robin had screamed "He's not a pet you can keep on a leash until you want his attention again!" at her, Nancy had stormed to the guest room she was staying in and slammed the door, not coming back out again for the rest of the evening. Robin had just collapsed onto the sofa beside him, bottle of his dad's whiskey in hand, and the kids had just turned and stared

until she waved them off. They just went back to watching whatever film they were watching now, Steve wasn't too sure which, as Robin got progressively drunker. Steve himself, had a few swigs from the bottle but refused to give the kids a sip, even with Max giving him a death glare. He had to give it to Lucas, kid had balls to deal with Max, though, the fact he keeps going back after being dumped numerous times says he's likely just a masochist. Not that Steve didn't completely understand where he's coming from, he knows he tends to let powerful women rule him; something Robin is trying to help him overcome, whilst also kind of doing the same.

Max was the first of the Party to leave, saying being here a week had already been pushing it, staying longer would just take things over the edge. He had pulled her aside before she left, and told her that if she ever needed something, to call him. He was worried about her, she'd been doing her best to act the same as before, but he could see it in the tightness of her eyes that things were not okay. During this past week, she'd just seemed so full of anger, snapping at them more than usual and often a frown befell her brow. He's been unsure since everything happened, about what he can do to try and help her, he knew she and Billy weren't close or anything, but it must have still been hard to deal with him dying. The first night she had stayed here, before the other kids had arrived, she had approached him, seeming nervous, and asked him if he and Billy had ever been friends. He hadn't known how to reply, she had had a look on her that he struggled to interpret, and the tone of her voice was somewhat hopeful. He didn't know why she would have thought they were anything close to friends; after that night at the Byers, the only time they had interacted was during basketball, and beyond getting right into his space as they played and his taunts, he ignored him any other time. Tommy was the one who sought him out, to rub not being popular or having Nancy anymore, in his face. Saying he shouldn't have given it all up when they all knew Nancy would just leave him one day. When he told Max no, that they were nothing close to friends, she had just looked confused, thanked him and wandered off, leaving him as the bewildered one. However, he didn't have a chance to question her about it, as the rest of the Party arrived.

Dustin left not long after Max, his mum picking him up as she had

dropped him off since his bike had a puncture. He hadn't wanted to leave, saying "Steve, you need me, I'm the best at de-escalating fights. You need that skill here, with Robin and Nancy being at each other's throats.". Steve just pushed him out the door, calling out bye as he shut it behind him. He'd just been left with Mike and Lucas after that, probably the Party members he'd spent the least amount of time with; Will used to join him outside the arcade sometimes, as the others fought over the machines, Dustin apparently trying to win back his high score on Dig Dug. They had stayed longer as Mike tried to persuade Nancy to come back home with him, but it only made her angrier and she'd shouted at him to mind his own business and leave her alone. It had seemed to really upset him, and Steve had wondered if he was looking to Nancy to help support him through El, leaving, but her refusal felt like he was being left behind again. They didn't stick around for much longer after that.

Now the house was silent except for the ticking of the grandfather clock within the foyer. The air felt heavy with the silence, pressing down on his shoulders. The last time they had all spent so much time together, they'd been fighting the Mind Flayer and it was hard not to think about that as he sat watching over kids, even more so now they were gone. Time seemed to be flying past so fast, but at the same time, had reached a standstill. Everything carried on moving forward but he still felt stuck, little things sending him back to the tunnels, or the lift and underground base, or looking down as the Mind Flayer impaled Billy Hargrove and Max screamed. He knew it was the same for everyone, feeling trapped but forced onward like on an inescapable conveyor belt, but at least they were better at pretending. He was so easy to read, unless he played dumb, but he was really getting tired of acting like the washed up, village idiot. Robin had been instrumental in helping him to understand that just because he didn't test well and his grades weren't great, doesn't actually mean he's dumb. That without him, they wouldn't have even realised the Russian transmission was coming from Hawkins, let alone the mall. He'd spent so much of his life feeling like a disappointment, with his c-average grades when his parents had both graduated from Ivy League universities. However, Robin has helped open his mind to the notion that if all his dad cared about was grades and results, then he was the real disappointment as a parent; the empty house attested to that. His parents split months up, spending half here and the other

half in Chicago, where the main office of his dad's company resided. Even when they were here, his dad spent most of his time at the local office and his mum travelled to the country club just a few miles away.

Having everyone here this past week, his loneliness had been kept at bay and part of him wished they never had to leave, but he couldn't keep them trapped in this frozen bubble of time with him. Not when they were becoming unstuck and taking their first steps to re-join the rest of humanity, starting high school and getting closer to adulthood. Though, when he thought about it, it felt like they were already better adults than some of the ones that haunted Hawkins, they had to be deal with all the shit that had been thrown at them. Steve felt he had more to learn off them, than he could teach; even Dustin managed to get himself a girl without him.

"-ve? Steve? Steve!" Robin's voice broke through the haze his thoughts had left him in, looking up to see her stood at the bottom of the stairs, a concerned frown on her face. "You okay? The kids gone?"

Shaking his head to clear the rest of the fog, he realised he was still leant back against the front door and had been since he shut it after Lucas and Mike left. "Yeah, yeah I'm okay. Just got lost in my thoughts, I guess.". His words didn't do much to get rid of her concerned expression, but she did move toward the kitchen, and he trailed behind her, trying to psyche himself up for the inevitable questions. The smell of coffee quickly blanketed the room and Robin sank onto one of the island stools, as she waited for the machine to finish making it, head falling into her hands with a groan

"Ugh, never let me drink again. Totally not worth the pain the next day.". She mumbled, regret obvious in her voice. Steve felt a small smile stretch his lips, he could count on her to make him feel better, even without meaning to. When the coffee was ready, Robin made a move to get up, but he waved her off, preparing some for both of them and making sure to add a spoonful of hot chocolate powder in Robin's. When she took a sip and detected the chocolate, a smile brightened her face and made her eyes twinkle. His heart beat a little faster in response, moments like this reminded him that he had once begun to fall for her, though he did come to understand that a lot of

it came down to Dustin pushing the idea and the lack of romantic entanglements since he and Nancy broke up. It was still difficult to deal with, especially after getting to know how cool she was. No use moping about it though, better to just focus on being a supportive friend. Plus, Robin has taken it upon herself to try and help him get dates, all attempts unsuccessful so far.

“What's got you all happy and smiley? You looked like you'd seen a ghost not long ago.” She said, eyebrow raised and blowing into her mug. At least she no longer had that concerned expression anymore.

“Nothing. Well, just thinking about how cool you are. You know I'm thankful, right? For being here since everything that happened.”. Steve couldn't look her in the eyes, fiddling with his hands around his mug. He still wasn't used to being so open and vulnerable. When there was no response for awhile, he looked up at Robin to see a strange look upon her face. She set her coffee down and cleared her throat.

“Steve, we've talked about this. It's okay to still have moments of attraction or interest in me, as long as you understand that that's all it will ever be. Don't-don't feel the need to hide it from me, I don't want you to feel you have to do that. I want us to be able to be open with another, to trust each other.”. She reached out and laid her hand on his, giving it a light squeeze before bringing it back to warm up with her mug.

“I know, I know. I just don't want you to think that it's the only reason I like being around you or make you uncomfortable...don't want to screw this up.”. The words came out mumbled, feeling a little awkward.

“You're not going to screw things up, Dingus. Shared trauma, remember?” Robin scoffed, holding out her pinkie with raised eyebrows, motioning her head towards him. He sighed and reluctantly curled his around hers for a moment.

“Yeah...shared trauma.”.

There was no movement from upstairs for a few hours, Steve and Robin had had a hearty breakfast and melded themselves into the sofa cushions, only moving to get more coffee or snacks. Nancy comes trotting downstairs, hair perfectly in place and clothes somehow still neatly pressed. Robin, with her hair a mess and still in her pjs, snorted upon seeing her, rolling her eyes towards Steve. He just slapped her knee and told her to be nice, which just caused her to grumble that she is nice and only if Nancy does the same. Nancy didn't join them, heading towards the kitchen instead and there was the sound of clashing dishes and short huffs. The noise seemed to annoy Robin more and so to avoid more fights, he decided to go see what Nancy was up to. Entering the room, he saw she was stood in the open door of the fridge, rummaging inside, before she pulled out the egg carton, milk and cheese and started to make an omelette. His presence in the doorway was definitely known, she'd glanced back at him as she put the ingredients away but didn't say a word to him until she was plating up the omelette.

“What do you want Steve? I just want to eat in peace, all right? Since *some people* cooked and didn't even think about leaving anything from for me.”. Nancy straightened up, her shoulders back, her eyes cold as they locked onto his. The look made Steve feel like he was nothing more than shit on the bottom of her shoe.

“Sorry, Nance, but we ate hours ago, and you've been upstairs all day. Plus, we ate a load of greasy food, what with Robin having a hangover, and I know how much you hate grease.” Steve said as he moved to sit opposite her. She flicked her eyes up at him quickly, before focusing back on her food.

“Oh, another hangover? How many has it been now?” Nancy scoffed under her breath, a mean little curl to her lips that disappeared upon seeing the serious expression on his face.

“I don't expect the two of you to get along but Robin's my friend, I'd at least appreciate it if you could be civil to each other. Especially as we're the only ones left here that know about everything, that aren't a

bunch of kids. We need each other.”. He could tell what he was saying was affecting her because she had stopped actually eating, now just pushing it around her plate. She mumbled out an apology and acknowledgement. “I know something is up, I mean, why else would you come here. What's going on, what's wrong?”.

“What's wrong? *What's wrong* is, I came here because I needed you, but you invited the Party around-“ – “*Max* invited them, thank you very much, not *me!*” – “-and spent the whole week focused only on them, or Robin, when you weren't at your new job. You never bothered with me, so don't come here now, acting like you care!”. Nancy got up in a huff, slamming her plate down onto the counter hard enough to crack it.

"The kids needed me too! Their best friends just moved away! Mike's girlfriend! You can't have expected me to just ignore them. As for Robin, this is still all so new to her, finding out that monsters from other dimensions exist. She's still adjusting, and yeah that means that sometimes she drinks a little too much to cope, but can you fucking blame her? We've had years to adapt but she got chucked in, headfirst, with a Russian conspiracy and a mind controlling monster that grew to be as tall as the mall!". He didn't mean to raise his voice at Nancy, but his frustration got the better of him. What did she want from him? She wasn't the only one he had to take care of anymore, he couldn't always put her first.

"Okay! Okay...I get it, I'll be less harsh about Robin, but you could have at least asked me how I was before now. My best friend, my boyfriend, is gone now too. Other than you and my brother - and he doesn't count because he's family - he's all I had too.". Tears welled up in Nancy's big brown eyes and Steve couldn't stop himself from being crushed at the sight of them. He always hated it when she cried. He pulled her into a hug, and she started sobbing into his shoulder. "Jonathan leaving isn't even the reason I came here, though its definitely not helping."

Steve drew back a bit to be able to see her face fully, before responding. "If it's not about Jonathan, then why did you?". There was a long period of silence, in which he could see Nancy was fighting within herself about whether to tell him or not. "Nance, you obviously came here for a reason, and you're refusing to leave for it

as well...Did something happen at home? Is Holly okay? Mike didn't mention anything."

"Holly's fine." Nancy sniffled, lifting her head to look him straight in the eyes. "But you're right, something did happen...or well, something nearly happened, and I found out about it.". She looked down again, swallowing, but with a deep breath she held her chin high, a determined set to her shoulders. "My mother has been acting funny for a few months now, and I finally was able to understand why, when she revealed something to me.". Another deep breath. "My mother was going to cheat on my dad...with Billy. Hargrove."

Steve felt his eyebrows shoot up and his eyes open wide. That was definitely not what he had been expecting her to say. He's not sure what he expected, but it was in no way that. *Holy shit!* He couldn't stop the words that escaped from his lips. "Isn't that illegal?!" His voice came out high pitched and squeaky, even breaking on the word illegal.

"No!" Nancy shouted vehemently, eyes just as wide, shaking her head violently. "No! Its not illegal! Gross, yes, but he had turned 18 in April, so he was no longer a minor...at least I hope so, she didn't exactly give me a time and date of when this happened...". Her voice trailed off, becoming unsure. "No, he was definitely of age, she's a good person at heart, she wouldn't even think about sleeping with someone underage...right?"

"I don't know Nance, he was only 18 for a few months. To be willing to cheat on your dad with him...she had to have been thinking about it before his birthday hit. I mean, fantasizing isn't illegal but it's still kind of creepy...*Billy* though, *really?*"

"Billy was objectively attractive, plus he had the Camaro and his fuck everything attitude. To a bored housewife that's apparently feeling stuck in her marriage, he must have seemed like such a thrill...ugh, thinking about it is so gross. He was gross, his looks couldn't make up for his shitty personality.". Nancy shook herself like she was trying to shake out the thoughts.

"Well, I mean, my good looks used to make up for mine. Until I grew a pair and realised how much of an asshole I was and decided to try

and do better...". Nancy looked at him with steely eyes at that.

"You were never a shitty person Steve. Not really. Yeah, you did shitty things, but it was never really you. This, who you are now, is the real you. I think, maybe, I was able to recognise that even back then, when I thought it was just because you were handsome and popular.". She smiled at him, slight and sweet, and he hated that it made his heart beat a little faster. He was supposed to be over the way she affected him.

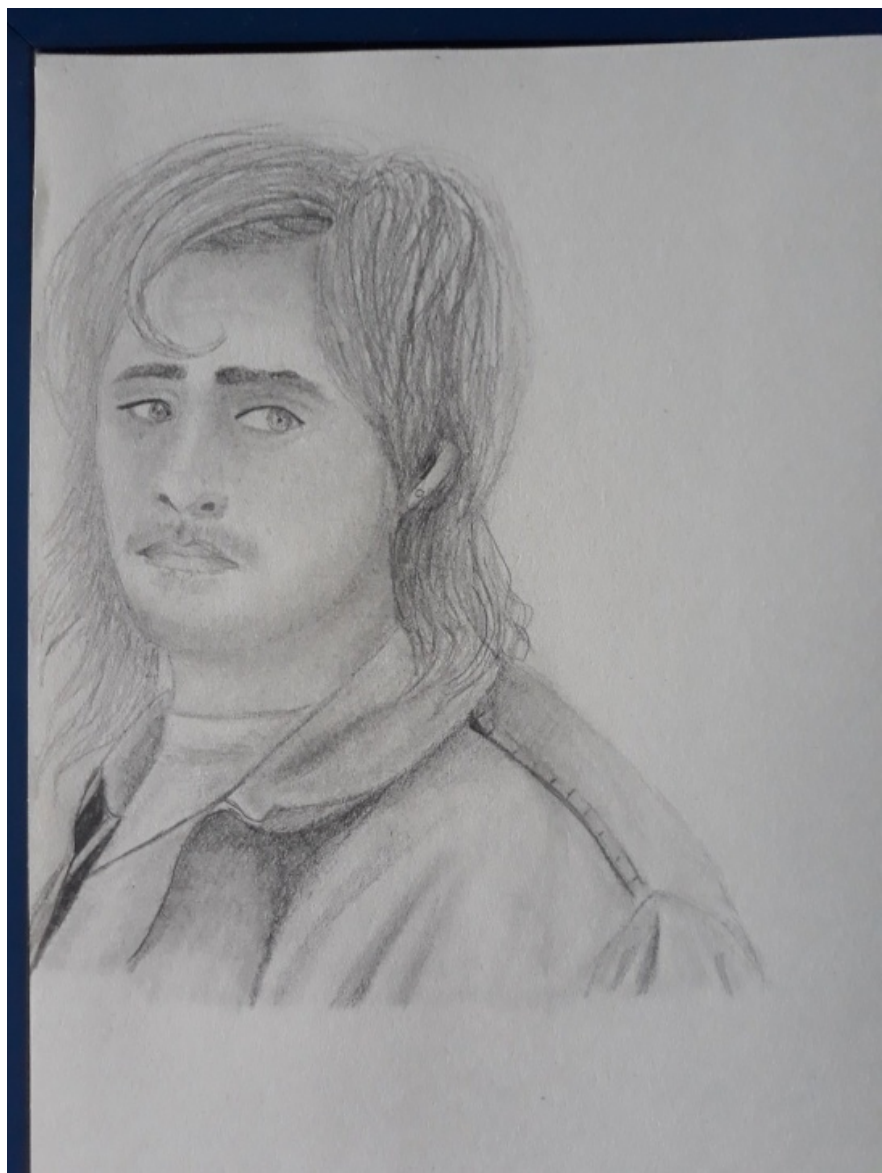
"I think standing up to a giant monster to save a little girl, might have shown that wasn't who he really was either...". Nancy didn't seem to know how to take his comment, a frown appeared as she chewed on her lip.

"Maybe...guess we'll never get to know if that's true now.". The atmosphere of the room had seemingly dropped a few degrees, as Steve felt a chill run up his arms. Steve didn't know how to handle what he had just been told. He understood that for some guys, the idea of a hot housewife wanting to fuck them was something amazing, but for him it had always just felt creepy. Especially since this is a small town and a majority of the housewives had seen him grow up. Since Billy only moved here last year, that wasn't an issue, but he was still way too close to Nancy's age, so her mum really should have just seen Billy as a kid like her daughter. Not as a guy to fuck because her husband barely paid her any attention. The whole thing did not bode well for the state of the Wheeler family.

After that, the mood remained too sombre for them to try and continue on a conversation, so Steve returned back to the living room, where it looked like Robin hadn't even moved in the time he'd been gone. To his surprise, Nancy followed after him and even gave a nod of acknowledgement to her. They didn't talk to each other, sat with Steve sandwiched between them, but it was a lot better than them fighting. Maybe it was a sign that eventually a day would come in which they could actually get along. Time passed pretty peacefully, even as he realised that the film Robin was watching was one of the Friday the 13th slasher films and the fake blood made nausea settle low in his stomach. However, his eyes quickly began to feel heavy and his head started nodding backwards. A shrill, screeching sound jerked him from his slumber and his eye caught on

the clock above the TV. 3:43am. Dread spread through his veins.

The phone was still ringing.



5. Moving Onwards

[A/N: No real warnings for this chapter. Comments are always welcome! Let me know what you think of the direction for Will's character]

Lucas arrived home just in time for dinner, his dad pulling the roast out of the oven just as he walked through the door. He didn't mean to arrive so late, but Mike had been really upset after they left Steve's, so he had gone back to his with him. His mum called out to him from where she had been pouring drinks at the table.

"Hey Lukie, how was your sleepover? Did you have a good time?". Once she set down the last full glass, she approached him to run a hand over his hair, before giving him a peck on the forehead. He made a face when her back was turned, roughly swiping his sleeve across his face.

"Yeah, Steve rented us a bunch of movies. Plus, we got to hang out in his pool.". Lucas plonked his backpack down by the stairs and dropped into his chair, pulling a face at Erica, who just screwed hers up whilst rolling her eyes.

"I'm glad you had a nice time. I know things have been difficult for you guys recently, so its good to hear you guys are supporting each other. We'll have to invite Steve over for dinner one night, to thank him for all the help he's been.". A smirk appeared on his mum's face as she sat down, leaning towards him. "Speaking of inviting people over for dinner, when are you going to invite Max round? We want to properly meet our sons girlfriend, unless you think we'll embarrass you?". Lucas felt his cheeks begin to burn, worsening when he caught sight of Erica's smug face. Luckily, he was saved from answering by his dad serving the roast beef and he raced to beat Erica to the crispy roast potatoes, sticking his tongue out when she whined. As they ate, they shared moments of their day; his mum had recently taken up gardening but so far managed to kill more plants then she raised. Not surprising since it was mostly an excuse to join the gardening club, comprised near entirely by the population of Hawkins housewives, as her job kept her from participating in their other social gatherings.

His dad always spent the weekends making models and figurines in their basement. Lucas used to help make them when he was younger but in the past few years had been doing it less and less. Maybe he'd start making a bit more of an effort to join him again.

His mum kept shooting him little smirks, winks and nudging his arm, throughout dinner, until he finally groaned out "Fine! I'll invite her!".

His mum beamed and clapped her hands, whilst his dad just looked on confused. "Great! Invite her over for next Saturday, okay? What does she like? Ooh, if you give me her number, I could give her mum a ring and plan her favourite meal!". A spark of panic burst through his nerves, and he couldn't stop the shout of "No!" from leaving his lips. His mum jumped in surprise, her eyes wide, and his dad said his name sternly in reprimand.

"I mean, there's no need to go through all that trouble, Max will like anything you guys cook, she's always going on about how bad her mum's cooking is.". Lucas did his best to keep his voice level but was sure it still came out a little shaky. The downwards curl at the corner of his mum's lips told him she wasn't happy with his save, but let it go.

"Okay...well, just let me know what she says.". With that, his mum focused her gaze on his dad, and they communicated silently for a few moments, ending with his dad nodding slightly.

Lucas rushed eating the rest of his dinner, asking for permission to leave the table and taking his empty plate back into the kitchen. He paused, leaning against the counter with his head down and taking a deep breath. He felt terrible for snapping like he did, but he couldn't let his mum try and talk to Max's; her mum still didn't know they were dating, just that they were classmates. They were lucky enough that she hadn't told her husband they were friends, if she knew they were together, they weren't sure how long she'd be able to keep it a secret. When he looked up and saw Erica staring at him, he just frowned back and made his way to his room, grabbing his bag along the way. Getting to his room, he went straight for his walkie and radioed for Max "Mad Max, come in. Come in, Mad Max, over.".

For a while, all he could hear was the distant muffled sound of his

family downstairs, until finally his radio burst to life and Max's voice came through the speaker.

"What do you want, stalker? Now isn't the best time. ". She was obviously annoyed, her voice rougher than normal. Lucas hoped it wasn't because she had been crying.

"My mum told me to ask you round for dinner next Saturday. Do you think you can come?". Though he didn't want to appear too keen on the idea, he feels like it unconsciously came out in the tone of his voice.

"I don't know Lucas-" he heard her breathe in deeply "I'll try okay? It's just, having been gone all this week, I'm not sure how happy Neil would be for me to be gone on another Saturday. Apparently Saturdays are supposed to be *family time* now.". Lucas could feel the bitterness radiating through the walkie. He couldn't help but think about Mike, how he'd never admit it, but he would love for his family to have a day dedicated to spending time together. When they were alone in his basement, Mike had confessed that he had been worried his parents relationship was falling apart and that they would end up getting a divorce. Lucas hadn't known how to respond at first, it was a position he'd never been in personally as his parents were still disgustingly in love. However, he had clapped Mike on the back and told him that maybe things aren't as bad as they seem, that maybe they just need more opportunities to go on dates. After contemplating it, Mike had agreed, stating he would offer to babysit Holly a lot more if it meant saving their marriage.

"Max, don't take this the wrong way, but why did your parents divorce? It's just...you can't tell anyone, but Mike is worried his parents might do the same.". He felt bad for airing Mike's confession without his permission, but Max would understand how he feels better than anyone. If it helps him, it's worth it.

"Yeah, OK, sucks for him but I don't know what you want from me? Parents get divorced for loads of different reasons. My parents told me they just fell out of love but overhearing that my mum had an affair with Neil before she even married my dad, makes me doubt she ever loved him at all. That it was all a fucking lie. So, I'm sorry that his parents might split, but it's better than playing pretend and

probably having affairs.”. Max’s breathing was rough, and her voice broke on the last word. Shock overcame him, wasn’t sure how to respond, she hadn’t mentioned any of this to him before. When he was about to try and console her, Max beat him to it. “Sorry Lucas, I didn’t mean to unload on you like that. Things have just been so crazy, and I don’t know what to do. It wasn’t just an affair...my mum said that she had only married my dad because she was pregnant, with me...but not by my dad. If she was telling the truth, and I don’t know why she’d lie to Neil about it, then he’s my real dad.”. Lucas could hear her voice catch on a muffled sob. “Which means Billy was my real brother.”. She was freely crying over the radio now and Lucas felt his heart clench at the sound of her sorrow.

The relationship between Max and Billy had always been somewhat of an enigma to Lucas. When they had first arrived in Hawkins, they had this explosive, burning anger between them, that fed into hatred of one another. After the confrontation at Will’s last year, the hatred faded only slightly but the bubbling rage was gone. They were just left with a simmering distaste and silence. Come the new year though, the two had a budding truce and they tolerated each other a lot more. Lucas would even dare say Max occasionally sounded fond when talking about how annoying he was. It had made him think of his relationship with his own sister, Erica, but it left a bad taste in his mouth to ever think they were similar. He didn’t get it, why Max had such a change of heart. To him, people like Billy didn’t change, they’d always be mean and bitter, becoming nothing more than angry drunks. The one time he had dared utter this to Max, she had broken up with him on the spot, saying he couldn’t be her boyfriend if he couldn’t understand her feelings. He never questioned their relationship after that.

Seeing Billy protect El, watching from that mall balcony, he had seen what Max must have seen in Billy the whole year. He had seen a future for Billy not as an angry drunk, all alone, but as an uncle to Max’s kids, who bought them things Max had refused to get. It fell apart at that first strike to his side and by the last one to his chest, he just saw Max showing those same kids a picture of Billy and talking about how he would have been their cool uncle. Even if she didn’t really believe it. Hearing that they were really related only brought those images back, except she’d call him the brother she didn’t really

know was her brother, until it was too late. It always felt like they were too late.

“Lucas? Lucas, you still there?”. Max’s voice broke him out of his stupor, crackling through the speaker.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m still here. Sorry, I’m just a little shocked is all. Just processing it. I don’t really know what to say, other than I’m sorry Max. Especially that you’ve only found it out now and not...before.”. He trailed off, finishing a little hesitantly.

“Ah, okay, sorry. I know it’s a lot to dump on you in one go. I wanted to talk about it all week but couldn’t bring myself to. It just feels like there’s so much that I don’t know, that’s been hidden from me- Shit! I have to go! I’ll try to make Saturday but no promises. Over and out.”. There was an urgency to her voice that sent alarms bells going off, but he felt useless. He couldn’t tell his parents he was worried because they would feel the need to get involved, and Max had drilled it into him that it would only make things worse. He could only hope that she was okay. Tomorrow they were starting high school, officially freshman, that alone was enough to worry about. If she didn’t check back in later then he was definitely going to make her explain what else is wrong tomorrow.

Their new place felt cold. Not just because Maine was physically colder, but it just gave Will this feeling of disquiet. He hoped that it would get better the longer he was here. He hated the cold.

The new house was bigger at least. Two storeys and with a bedroom for each of them. The rooms weren’t huge, standard box rooms, but anything was better than having to share with Jonathan again. He tried not to think about how they were only able to afford it because they had received compensation for their *trauma*. His mum seemed to like it well enough, they had a big garden with a tire swing attached

to an oak tree, that El liked to play on. Before they had even fully unpacked, his mum was remarking about having enough room for a vegetable garden. She'd never mentioned wanting one before.

El didn't say much during the week, only when situations required it. Will couldn't blame her, she had only really just adjusted to living with them in Hawkins, before having to move, far away from Mike. She seemed to be struggling with the distance between them the most, now that she could no longer just use her powers to visit him through the void space. He'd caught her numerous times trying to move things or blindfolded and listening to static; the objects just wobbled for a second then stilled, or her nose spotted blood before she ripped the fabric off and threw it in frustration. Will had watched her do the same back in Hawkins but there was something different about how she was doing it now, seeming rushed or urgent. He just put it down to her desire to see Mike.

The night was always the time when they all felt the affects of the events of the last few months the most. His mum had been struggling to sleep ever since and so took advantage of it to get a job working nights at a 24-hour diner. She said she wanted to always be available during the day for them now. Jonathan was left in charge of them whilst she worked, and Will was thankful that he was at least a slightly better cook. He'd got a job part time at a local newspaper, taking pictures like he had back in Hawkins. It was Jonathan's senior year, which meant he was just that much closer to leaving. Will didn't know quite how to feel, he wanted him to be happy, but it terrified him too. He couldn't shake the feeling that things still weren't right, and he wasn't sure if he could cope without Jonathan if something did happen. He needed to learn to protect himself, so he wouldn't need to rely on others as much.

Will and El both had nightmares, nearly every night. El had told him that she dreamt of the Mind Flayer getting her, that it made her hurt them. He was sure there was more that she wasn't saying but didn't ask. He told her that in his dreams, he was the monster all along, that they hadn't actually gotten ridden of it last November, he had just pretended they had. That in the worst of his nightmares, he had turned his mum and Jonathan into pop people too, saw them melt alongside the others to build him. Instead of Billy saving El, it was

Mike and he was the one that Will punctured. The two of them cried and held each other for a long time, now whenever they had a nightmare, they curled together on the sofa and fell asleep like that.

The best part of the house to Will was the room at the back of it. He was sure it must have been an extension done by the past owners, since it didn't have anything built on top of it. This meant they had been able to have windows put into the roof and alongside the walls being mostly half windows, it allowed an abundance of sunlight to flow into the room. It was perfect for a studio and no one had complained when he had commandeered it as such. Not far from the boundary of their backyard was a lake that he could just see from the windows, the tree's from their neighbours land obscuring the view just slightly. If he wasn't in the studio, practising using the paints he had been gifted by the Party, then he was out by the lake, sketching with his crayons or pastels. He was out there now, sketching the setting sun, when someone approached him.

"Oh, wow, that looks amazing! You're got real talent there.". Will had whipped around at the sound of the smooth, tenor-like voice from behind him. Stood there was a boy, hair fairly short but blonde and wavy. His skin glowed with a healthy golden tan that made his bright blue eyes stand out even more. A lump appeared in Will's throat as the guy smiled at him, seeming relaxed and easy-going. There was a kindness to his eyes that made him think of Mike. The guy raised an eyebrow as Will remained silent. "I'm Oliver, but everyone calls me Ollie. I live just a few houses down. Saw you guys moving in the other day, so when I saw you out here I thought, what better time to introduce myself.". Oliver held his hand out to shake, which Will had done so tentatively.

"I'm Will...nice to meet you.". Upon standing, Will noticed he was only a few inches shorter than the guy, but his sunny presence made him seem so much bigger. His expression didn't change when he noticed Will's hesitancy.

"You an artist, Will? 'Cos that sketch you were doing was really good man. The high school has a great art club, if you're interested?". Oliver's smile grew a little bigger, leaning into Will's space to catch another look at the drawing in his hands. He could feel the warmth of his body radiate against his side, making his heart beat faster.

“O-oh, are you part of the art club then?”. He jumped slightly as Oliver let out a loud chuckle, pulling back and beaming at him.

“Nah, I’m terrible at drawing. I’m the pitcher on the baseball team. Do you like baseball?”. As he spoke, he mimicked throwing a pitch and Will couldn’t help but find it cute.

“Ah...sorry, I don’t really know much about it. I’m not very good at sports.”. He couldn’t keep looking at him too long, he kept shuffling and lowering his head. God, he felt so embarrassed, why couldn’t he just talk like a normal person?

“You don’t need to be good at sports when you’re that good at art. Lots of people are good at sports, not that many are that talented. I’ll make sure to ask for a drawing so I can show it off when you’re a famous artist. Right?”. With that last line, Oliver knocked his shoulder against Wills, and he felt his face light up with a blush.

“I wouldn’t say *that*. I just really like drawing...but, um, if you wanted one, I-I could draw you something. Oh, I know! If you were a superhero, what power would you have?”. Oliver seemed a little surprised by the question but rolled with it.

“Oh, uh, I’m not sure. Maybe super speed? If I had that I’d be able to throw an amazing fast ball.”. Again, he mimicked throwing a pitch but added sound effects of it flying fast, causing Will to giggle a little.

“Sounds perfect then. I’ll be sure to make a drawing of you as the fastest superhero ever.”. Will smiled sheepishly at him, receiving a blinding grin in return.

“I look forward to seeing that.”. Oliver looked behind him as a shout was heard, turning back with a more subdued smile. “It was nice to meet you Will. Look for me at school, OK? Bye.”. With that, he left, jogging backwards for a bit before running off with one last wave. Once he was gone a fair distance, Will smiled to himself, smothering a giggle with his sketchbook.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad here.

El was feeling uneasy, but she wasn't sure why. Will had said maybe it was because she was nervous about starting high school, since it will be her first time going to any school. She wasn't so sure that was the issue though. Nightmares had been plaguing her ever since July, but they've been different recently; ever since that one about Billy. He kept re-appearing in her dreams but, unlike that first time, she couldn't get close to him, it was like there was an invisible wall holding her back. Instead, she'd just had to watch as he cried or writhed in pain. His hair was always gone, and those numbers were still burnt into the back of his head. Sometimes he was covered in fading bruises or nearly healed cuts. She doesn't get why this was the Billy her dreams made her see. It hurt to see.

Night came and she dreaded falling asleep. Joyce was out at work, leaving the three of them in the house. Normally, she would try to sleep and if she had a nightmare, she would drag Will to the sofa to keep her company until they fell asleep. When he told her about his nightmares, she almost told him about her Billy dreams, but something stopped her, so she told him about the nightmares she had before. Tonight though, she didn't want to try sleeping alone, so she sneaked to Will's room and knocked, waiting for him to call out before entering. He was sat at his desk, the lamp shining down at a drawing he was in the middle of.

"Will, can't sleep. Don't want bad dreams. Can I stay here?". She stayed close to the door, waiting for his response.

"Hey, El. Of course, you can stay! Shall we make a fort? We could steal some snacks from the kitchen too.". Will got up and hugged her, then started pulling her towards the kitchen before she had even answered.

"Yeah, forts are fun. Do we have eggos? Eggos are snacks.".

"Sure, we do, mum knows they're your favourite, so she makes sure to keep them stocked up.".

Once they had gathered a collection of coke, eggos, reese's pieces and skittles, they returned to Will's room, being even quieter on the way back as they didn't want to be caught with so much food. They pulled the desk closer, parallel to the bed, so they could drape a sheet over them both and sit on the floor beneath it. They spread their bounty between them and El's eyes lit up when she bit into one of the waffles, making Will laugh as he remembered Mike telling him about the girl with cool powers who saved him and loved eggo waffles. El wasn't sure what he was laughing about but joined in anyway. The lamp flickered with a crackle and as she looked up at it, the corner of the drawing caught her eye. Kneeling, she pulled it down from the desk, to Will's surprise, who quickly made a grab for it, but she held it out of his reach.

"What is this? I don't know them...new DD character?". El asked slowly, examining the drawing in her hand. It was a boy with yellow hair and blue eyes, in a weird outfit and with lines flowing out from behind him. There was only one boy she had known, with blonde hair and blue eyes. "Billy?".

"No! It's not Billy. It's- I met a boy earlier, out by the lake. He said he liked my drawing and asked if I could do one for him. So, I asked what power he would have as a superhero and he said super speed...so I drew him, the lines represent him moving really fast.". Will snatched the drawing back at his outburst, holding it close to his chest and mumbling with his head low. He seemed embarrassed.

"Pretty."

Will's head snapped up, eyes bulging and cheeks red. "W-what? I never said that!". El tilted her head in response, a confused furl to her brow.

"The drawing is pretty."

"Oh!" Will gave out a relieved sigh, his shoulders that had hiked up, now relaxing. "Thank you."

After that, they just dissolved into giggles and it took them a long time to stop; only after Jonathan had popped his head into the room and asked them to quiet down a bit. Eventually, after discussing how

they hoped school would be like, they fell asleep leaning on each other.

The darkness overtook her slowly, crawling its way into her mind, her senses were overcome by it. It had become a much too familiar sensation now. When she opened her eyes, El expected to see Billy curled up in the ground again, sobs escaping him; however, when she finally opened her eyes, she met haunted blue ones just before her. She made to scream but before the sound could escape, his hand slapped across her mouth, the other holding a finger to his lips and making a 'sshh' sound. She was petrified, frozen, unable to move. She hadn't been able to touch him since that first time and it made her scared of what had changed, that now he could. She could hear and feel, still had use of her senses. His slightly laboured breath blew warmth across her cheek and panic settled deep within her. This felt too real. Too alive.

Billy was constantly shuffling slightly, checking over his shoulder but keeping that one finger pressed to his lips. El thought she could see blood staining his upper lip and she automatically licked her own, the phantom taste of iron on her tongue. Suddenly the air became painfully cold, her skin tingling and sensitive, like being pricked with a thousand needles. The darkness beyond Billy began to shift and a rumbling groan grew louder, seemingly echoing from all around them. She opened her mouth to ask what was going on, when Billy grabbed her wrist in a tight, squeezing grip.

"He's coming. You need to leave. He still wants you. Won't stop until he does.". Staring into his eyes, El felt herself turn weightless, like she was floating. She became aware of a high-pitched ringing in her ears and a heavy weight on her shoulder. She felt herself falling backwards, but instead of into more darkness, it was into light. As the last of darkness faded, she thought she heard Billy say, "Protect Max".

Jerking up from her laid-back position, El became aware that the high-pitched noise she had been hearing was her own screams. Will was knelt above her, eyes wide and arms outstretched like he had been attempting to wake her.

"He's coming!" El just kept repeating those words, her expression

stricken with fear. Will ran for the door, coming back with Jonathan rushing in behind him. Upon seeing him, El burst into tears and launched herself into his arms.

“Who’s coming El? Maybe it was just a dream?”. She violently shook her head, her sobs getting louder even as she tried to stifle them in order to talk.

“*H-He’s* coming. Coming back. Wants me. Billy. He told me. I felt him. Its real, not a dream. Not a dream...”. She felt Jonathan still beneath her and pulled away to see the shocked expression on his face.

“Billy Hargrove? He told you? But he’s dead. Right?” Jonathan’s voice was high pitched and shaky, breaking as he spoke the word dead.

“I thought so too. Thought it was just a dream. But I felt him. He talked to me. He’s...different. In pain. I think...he’s been pulling me into the void when I sleep. He warned me. Asked me to protect Max.”.

“Shit...Shit! We have to tell the others! Even if it turns out to be nothing, it’s best to tell them anyway. Being dismissive didn’t get us anywhere last time.”. Jonathan continued on under his breath. “Ah, but we don’t have a working phone yet. Wait, I think I saw a pay phone not too far away. We can use that. Yeah, can use that.”. He spun to face El and Will, hurrying them out to his car and pulling out of the drive before any of them had even buckled in. Less than ten minutes later they stop at a pay phone on the side of the road, Jonathan picking up some coins left in the cup holder.

“It’s too late to call any of your friends, so we’ll call Steve. He can let them know, okay?”. Will and El nodded but remained silent, holding tight onto each other. Jonathan fumbled putting the coins in, dropping one from his shaking hands and letting out a curse. Finally, he got the phone working and dialled Steve’s number, swearing under his breath at how long it took him to answer.

“Steve? Steve! It’s Jonathan. Something’s wrong! The Mind Flayer, apparently it’s still alive...and so is Billy Hargrove.”.

6. Haunting

[A/N: I am so sorry this is so late, its been a pain trying to write this chapter because of writer's block. Hope you guys like it! Comments are gifts!]

Jonathan had barely moved in the past hour. He had sat at the table after they got back home from calling Steve, head falling into his hands and quickly joined by Will and El. He was so overwhelmed, all of them had thought it was over, that they could finally start to move on. That's why they had moved in the first place. Apparently that didn't matter. There's no escape. It would chase them no matter where they go. When Will came rushing into his room that night, the fear on his face was so familiar, he had felt his heart and stomach drop to his feet. Hearing El fearfully repeating "He's coming!" under her breath, goose-bumps had risen all over him, a chill crawling down his spine. *Did they really have to go through this all over again?* He contemplated just pretending it was just a dream and telling them to go back to bed, but then he thought about where ignoring the signs last time left them. Without Hopper.

His mum always came home straight from work, around 5am. Looking up at the clock above the fireplace, it read 4:52am, and he felt a small part of his anxiety ridden body relax in the knowledge he wouldn't be alone to deal with this for much longer. A soft, sleepy sigh sounded from beside him and he looked over to see Will with his head laid upon his arms, eyes twitching between open and shut as he fought to stay awake. In contrast, El was sat on Will's right, with her back straight and eyes wide, but blank. She was gripping Will's hand in hers, tightly enough they had gone bone pale. He really should send them to bed, it was their first day of high school, they had to go. Jonathan didn't care much about going himself, he didn't really care what other students thought about him; it was different for them, not just because it was good to try and make friends as a freshman, but they were also new to town and didn't know anyone else. It was an important day, and this had ruined it. Again. So instead of sending them upstairs, he just grabbed a blanket from the back of the sofa

and draped it over Will's shoulders.

The jingle of keys from the door signalled the arrival of their mum. Jonathan must have been too distracted to have heard her car pulling up. He moved to meet her at the door, making her jump when she caught sight of him as she pushed the foot open.

"Oh! Jonathan, you surprised me! What are you doing waiting at the door like that?". She caught sight of Will and El still sat at the table and instantly her face shifted into one of panic. "What's going on? Did something happen? Is anyone hurt?". She dropped her bag at the door, rushing to Will's side and cradling his head in her hands; checking his face for any injuries as he blearily opened his eyes, a softly slurred "Mum?" slipping from his lips. She shushed him, laying his head against her chest and smoothing his hair with her other hand. Jonathan came up beside them, placing his hand on El's shoulder, who still hadn't moved at their mum's arrival. Still in shock. His mum glanced over at her too and the panic transformed into horror.

"What's wrong with El? D-Did her powers come back?". Her eyes somehow grew even wider. "Is Mike OK?". She moved to crouch between Will and El's chairs, grabbing hold of their hands and holding on tight. When she looked back up at Jonathan, her eyes were glistening with unshed tears.

"Honestly, I'm not too sure what's going on either. She fell asleep and woke up screaming, saying 'He's coming' over and over again. Said she saw Billy Hargrove, that he felt alive and told her that the Mind Flayer is still alive, still wants her. That it won't stop 'til it gets her.". A lump was thick in his throat and he tried to talk around it, but it came out sounding choked. "Not sure how much of it is real, but didn't want to take any chances, so got a hold of Steve to tell him to let the others know. I think it's best we act like it's real.". He didn't have to explain why, the unsaid implication hung heavy in the air.

He felt her place a soft, cool palm against his cheek and he nearly flinched at the contact. He felt like a live wire, anxiety buzzing in his veins. However, as she continued to smooth her thumb across his cheekbone, he felt himself relaxing. She was here now; he wasn't dealing with trying to save the kids alone. "You did the right thing

Jonathan. I would love to say what El said is impossible, but if you had asked me five years ago what's impossible, I'd have said monsters and superpowers. I'm no longer sure what's impossible, so everything is possible." Looking down at her, Jonathan could see why it was so easy for people to think she's weak, but he knew that his mum's eyes truly spoke of her strength, her gaze unwavering and determined. He truly admired her for it, wished that he could hold onto hope as long as she can. She believed in Will's survival when he had given up, she faced exorcising Will during his possession when he had turned away. It was only because of her that he had learnt to face the beasts that wanted them to suffer, head on.

"If it's true, what do we do? We barely made it out alive last time, still lost some, and we had all been together in the end. Now we are completely split apart, and without Hopper...can we even make it without him? Not to mention, El doesn't have her powers anymore!". Jonathon couldn't stop imagining that bloated mass of flesh they left sprawled on the mall floor, crashing through the roof of their new house, trapping them beneath the rubble, only able to watch as it yanked El from the wreckage. He felt like he really was trapped under concrete, unable to move; only able to breathe, but with each moment that passed it got harder and harder to do so, until he was wheezing in a desperate attempt to take in air. This was supposed to be their safe place, away from the destruction that Hawkins had wrought in their lives! A fresh start! Instead, the monsters just found another way to haunt them.

Mum slapped her hands down hard on his shoulders, jolting him from his spiralling thoughts. Once again meeting those fierce eyes and feeling like the weight of the fallen house had been lifted and he had been pulled to freedom. "Worrying over how and if we survive this, does nothing. We just have to survive no matter what. For your brother, Will, and for...your sister, El, we will fight 'til the end. So, there's no point in imagining scenarios where we don't make it, it only makes it seem that much harder to overcome this. We don't know if it knows where we are, that we moved, so going back to Hawkins right now might trap us. We only go when we are sure that this is a real threat, in the hope that once it does find out we are here, then we are already on our way back home, ready and waiting.".

The squeak of a chair across wooden flooring alerted them to movement behind them. El had stood up, facing them, an intense seriousness to her features. "It doesn't know where I am, but it's looking for me. I think it was there. In the dream. With me and Billy. The dream is like the void...but *different*. It's not mine. I don't go there but I am there. I don't understand why. Billy was warning me. It looks for me, but not been found yet."

Will tugged on El's sleeve, his eyes bright and brimming with tears. "You can't go there?". His voice was rough, eyelids still heavy with sleep. He moved his hand from her sleeve to take hold of hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"No. The static would take me. Still not working." El lowered her head, shame seemingly burning on her cheeks. Jonathon's chest clenched at the sight and he was reminded of when Mike had scolded them about relying too much on El's powers. If she still had them, they'd be able to find out if Billy really is alive, and if he was, then the Mind Flayer likely is too. Unfortunately, things were never that simple for them. Her dreams were the only connection they had, but it meant risking it latching onto her. Not only that, but El had no control over when these dreams occurred.

"So, can you tell when you're going to have one of these dreams?". Mum's voice cut through the building tension, as they'd all gone silent in thought. She stood before El, hands on her hips and legs shoulder width apart; a strong stance, like she was ready to take on the monster there and then. El just shook her lowered head in response. Jonathon clenched his fists as a wave of hopelessness overcame him. "That's fine, sweetheart. We'll just make sure that someone is always with you when you go to sleep, okay? Need to be able to wake you up as soon as you seem to be having a nightmare. If you're not there long, it hopefully makes it harder for it to track you.". Mum glanced at the clock and upon seeing that it was coming up to 5:32am, she sighed and motioned for El to sit back down. "Well, it's too late to go back to bed now, so who's up for breakfast? Pancakes okay?".

They all nodded but remained subdued, the promise of pancakes not even getting El to raise her head. Jonathon couldn't imagine how she must be feeling. Moving here was supposed to be her chance at having a normal life; yet here they were, back at square one, forced

to play this nightmarish game again. Normality stolen from her just as her fingertips grazed it. He never should have let himself believe they were safe, that things could be normal again. Normal never existed, ignorance just allowed them to live within the fantasy of it.

The sun grows higher in the sky, as does the dark bags under their eyes. Will nearly falls asleep, face first, in his syrup covered pancakes. By the time 7.30 arrives, El and Will are piling into Jonathon's car and pulling out of the drive, under their mum's watchful eye. It seemed so insignificant now, but if it was all going to go to shit again, then Jonathon could at least give them the chance of having the typical teenage experience of starting high school. However, he couldn't shake the feeling that something lurked behind him, waiting.

Steve kept himself in check until Robin and Nancy left for school. Once he was sure they were well and truly gone, he broke down, breath coming short and fast, legs giving way beneath him. He was trying to take in huge gulps of air, but it felt like they got stuck in his throat and choked him. Tears ran fast and warm down his cheeks, salty on his lips, even as the rest of his body went cold in fear. His vision swam in a sea of grey, black spots dancing before him as he became light-headed. His head became weightless, but his body anchored him to the ground, resting heavy against the front door.

He was so cold, chills running down his spine as the room's temperature seemed to drop by several degrees. The walls seemed to close in on him, the hallway becoming longer, seemingly endless even as their family portrait stared back at him from the far wall. His own eyes glared back, looking empty and alien, which only made Steve feel even more disconnected from reality. Darkness seeped into the hallway from the open doorways, creeping across the pristine cream carpet towards him. Shifting and grasping, gnarled hands aching to drag him into their menacing depths. It reared up, standing

tall above him, time ceasing to exist in the places its shadow touched; when suddenly, with an explosion of movement too fast for Steve to track, a sharp pain appears in his chest. He stares, in shock and disbelief, at the darkness impaling him like a spear. Black blood oozes from the wound and crawls across his skin. He chokes on the taste of terror as it climbs higher and higher up his neck, until its burrowing into his eyes! Then there is only darkness.

He opens his eyes to bright flashes of light, and loud echoing booms, recognising the white frame of the broken ceiling of Starcourt Mall. Shooting up in time to see the Mind Flayer puncture the muscled chest of Billy Hargrove. Watch him fall moments before the monster screams and collapses. Except this time, Billy doesn't utter his apologetic last words and become still forever; no, just as the copies of the Party begin to move away, he splutters back to life with a spurt of black blood flying from his mouth as he spasms with wet coughs. Steve couldn't move, stuck to the cold marble floor, only able to observe. He was the only one who saw the monster melt into shadows and edge closer to where they stood frozen over Billy's body. Steve screamed at them to get away, but nobody moved, as if they couldn't hear him. Max crumpled to the ground beside her brother, broken sobs a dense weight on the air. It felt like he tore the muscles in his throat as he fought to gain their attention, to warn them, but it was too late. The shadow had reached them. It engulfed Billy, swallowing him whole into its inky maw, until he lost sight of him entirely and the monster was all that was left. The kids didn't react, they couldn't see that Billy was no longer there. Until El sat down beside Max, and his arm, shrouded in darkness, suddenly shot out to wrap his fingers tightly around her throat, her eyes bulging so wide they looked like they would burst. Pulling her into the shadows with him, to the muffled screams of Max and Mike.

The shadows twist and writhe, and Steve is unable to tear his eyes away, holding his breath as his skin crawls with anticipation of something more to come. He doesn't have to wait long, as the darkness recedes, until Billy is fully revealed, with a cape of shadows flowing behind him. He turns his head slowly, dark eyes latching onto Steve's. It smiles at him, lips stretching wide over teeth stained black, the same liquid continuing to ooze from his gaping chest wound. The expression is overlaid in his mind with the image of

Billy from their fight last year, but they don't line up as well as Steve first thought. The wildness in the younger Billy's eyes is missing, even as he swipes his tongue across his teeth; it is nothing more than a cheap imitation of his old cocky grin. Just one more piece of evidence that Billy Hargrove is no longer, a copy left in his place. The lone pawn on the chess board.

"-ve?"

A loud thumping roused him from the heavy blanket of unconsciousness, the vibrations from it beat against his head as it lay against the ground. He must have fallen onto his side from where he had been sat against the door. As he sat up, his whole body ached, and he felt more vibrations against his spine that rested against the crimson wood. At least he knew what the pounding was.

"Steve? Buddy, I know you're in there! Keith said you never turned up to work.". The banging continued and Dustin's crackly voice came through from the other side, slightly muffled by the thickness of the door. "Come on man, you can't be missing work without notice already. You know Keith is looking for any excuse to get rid of you!".

Steve sighed, closing his eyes and dropping his head back against the door. For Dustin to be here, saying he missed work, he must have been down for the count for most of the day. That scared him more than he would like to admit; that he could lose so much time to a nightmare. He had been fortunate in that he only got nightmares for a few days after each Upside-Down horror show, so for him to have one now, it doesn't bode well. What happened in it alone unsettled him, squeezing in his chest and twisting in the pit of his stomach.

"Steve!". Dustin yelled, shocking him from his stupor. He must have kicked the door as it jerked, causing Steve to bump his head against it. Cursing, he finally pushed himself off the ground to yank the door open. Dustin must not have heard his movements, as he let out a short scream at his sudden appearance and growl of "What?".

"Steve, man, you can't scare a guy like that!". Dustin whined, slightly shrill, with one hand on his heart and the other holding up his bike. Steve squinted at the bike, suspicious, since normally he would just dump it on the grass. Glancing from the bike to the door, he noticed

a dark mark against the wood that hadn't been there before. It was much too long and narrow to be from Dustin's foot. He better pray it wipes off or they'll have to answer to Steve's mum for ruining her specially picked, rich bloodwood door with stained glass windows. It was a point of pride for her.

"Dustin, what are you doing here? Wasn't your mum taking you out for a meal to celebrate your first day at high school?". A strong wave of weariness crashed over Steve, and he ran his fingers through his hair with a groan, dropping them back to his side when Dustin remained silent. There was a strange look on his face, his gaze locked on Steve's arms. Following his line of sight, Steve spotted bright pink scratches up the underside of his forearm, tiny spots of red where the skin had broken. "What the hell?" he whispered under his breath, turning his arms over to check for more marks. Seeing no more, he assumes he must have clawed himself whilst unconscious, most likely when he was fighting to move inside that hell.

"What am I doing here? I'm here because I was worried about you Steve! I went straight to Family Video after school to tell you about my day and to invite you to join us for a meal tonight, only for you to not even be there! So, I race my way here and knock for at least fifteen minutes, and all I get is *what am I doing here?* Screw you!" Dustin dropped his bike to stand in front of Steve, a finger raised to poke him in the chest. The jab left a sharp but lingering ache in its wake, and his mind flashed to that wriggling, mottled appendage buried deep inside his ribcage. He acts on impulse, grabbing Dustin by the arms and pulling him into a hug, holding the back of his head in one hand, nearly knocking his hat off. Dustin froze within the embrace, obviously taken by surprise, before he eventually gave Steve an awkward pat on the back.

"Sorry Dustin, I didn't mean anything bad by it. I just lost track of time and forgot about work. It happens.". At this, Dustin drew back and frowned, eyes searching Steve's face. He must not have liked what he saw as he stepped away with a huff, crossing his arms tightly across his chest.

"Steve. You don't have to lie to me. I know something is up. I'm in high school now, which means Robin and I now go to the same school. She came to me before first period and asked if I'll be seeing

you later, said you were acting weird this morning and that she's worried. So, what's going on? We've fought inter-dimensional monsters and Russian spies together; you can trust me!". His eyes were glistening, tears clinging to his long lashes and his voice kept breaking.

Steve felt like shit looking down at Dustin, seeing how upset he had made him, but he didn't know what to do. Talking to Dustin about the phone call would vastly increase the chances of it getting back to Max and he couldn't allow that; not when they don't even know if any of it is real yet. He couldn't put her through thinking she had her brother back, only to lose him again. No, he wasn't going to tell anyone until they got concrete proof. No matter how cruel it felt to keep it a secret.

"I trust you Dustin, I do, but I'm just not ready to tell anyone yet. I promise, you'll be the first person I talk to when I am.". He puts his hand out for Dustin to shake, sweating as the passing seconds build up in silence as Dustin makes no move to accept it. He's debating drawing his hand back, unsure of how long to leave it hanging, when Dustin raises his own; only to spit on it and clasp their hands together before Steve has a chance to snatch his back. The spit combines with the sweat beading on his palm, to create a film of hot bodily fluid that has Steve gagging when his hand is free, quickly wiping it on Dustin's shirt; which does nothing to rid him of the shit eating grin.

"Gross, man, what the hell?". The feeling of spit coating his palm lingers, even with him repeatedly wiping it on his jeans. He reluctantly motions for Dustin to follow him as heads to the kitchen to scrub his hands clean. There's a thump from the entrance and the sound of Dustin cursing, Steve just hopes he hasn't damaged anymore of his property or he'll have him fixing and cleaning the house before his mum comes back; or just chuck him to the wolf that is his mother on a rampage. When Dustin rounds the corner, it's with a sheepish smile and hands waving about at a more ferocious speed than normal. *Yep, something is definitely broken.*

"Soooo, Steve, my man, you never gave me an answer.". At his blank look, Dustin rushed to elaborate, dropping onto one of the island stools with an ear-splitting screech. "About going to dinner with my

mum and me tonight? Not going anywhere special, just the local diner, but it's the thought that counts. You're coming, right? What am I saying, of course you are, you love my mum!"

Steve rolled his eyes as he moved to sit opposite him, not before turning the coffee maker on. "Why even ask if you're just going to decide for me? I could have other plans, you know!". Steve had the childish urge to stick his tongue out at Dustin but refrained, instead snatching his trusty cap off and ruffling his hair. This had Dustin letting out an inhuman squawk as he leapt to try and grab his hat back, only succeeding in making Steve guffaw and hold it further away.

"Steve! Stop being such a dick! Give me that back!". Dustin had gone ruby red, hands clenched tight at his sides and spittle showering the table as he yelled. The joy of playing keep-away quickly vanished and Steve planted the hat back on his head, just as the coffee machine beeped to let him know it was ready.

"I don't get why you love those hats so much. They do nothing for you, hiding your great head of hair." He remarked over his shoulder, getting up to make his drink. When he looked back, Dustin's eyes were downcast and his brows furrowed harshly, creating a deep ravine between them. He was overwhelmed with a sense of sorrow looking at his dejected friend. He used to be able to count on Dustin being a force of energy and enthusiasm, but ever since this summer – heck, even earlier in the year – he's been a lot quieter, almost sombre. Some would just put it down to maturing, but Steve knew better; he and Dustin are so similar, more so than others comprehend, and he knew it stemmed from loneliness. Recognised it in himself, after he lost Nancy. Dustin and Suzie were still going strong; however, they rarely got a chance to talk. No, Suzie wasn't the issue; it was the Party, or lack thereof. He and Will had been the ones left out as Mike and Lucas spent more time with their girlfriends than with them, and though the two were good friends, they didn't work as well as a pair; hence why Dustin started spending so much time with Steve. Not that Steve minded, in fact he loved it, finally felt like the older brother he had always wanted to be. However, all he had talked about those first few months was the guys, but especially Lucas. After Max arrived and she began dating Lucas, Steve noticed

that he saw Dustin and him together less and less, the tales of their adventures along with it.

“You know why! I told you my dad was a trucker and it makes me feel closer to him!”. The words were barely audible to where Steve leant against the marble counter, sipping his too hot milky coffee, but they were full of anger.

“Yeah, but I don’t get *why* you’d want to feel closer to a guy who left you!”. Steve regretted what he said as soon it slipped past his lips; not because he didn’t believe what he was saying, but for the hint of resentment he saw in Dustin’s glare.

“Oh, because Papa Harrington is *so fantastic!* He *totally* dropped *everything* when he heard his son had been beaten up, or when he barely survived a ‘fire’ at the mall! *Right, Steve?*”. Dustin stalked forward, eyes intent on Steve, who felt like prey trapped within his gaze; for all the height difference between them, he suddenly felt so small. His own rage at Dustin’s rebuttal bubbled low in his belly, but he ignored it; he’d learnt the hard way that acting on it would do no one any good. Plus, this was Dustin, who rarely ever got truly mad, who was more forgiving than people gave him credit for. For him to be this angry, Steve had really screwed up.

“Sorry Dustin, I wasn’t thinking. It’s wrong of me to try and tell you how to feel, especially when I’m not in a similar position. Hey, at least you have your mum, she’s amazing and loves you so much. Can’t let a lady like her down by not wining and dining her tonight, right?”. Steve gave Dustin a gentle nudge on the shoulder and he could tell Dustin was doing his best to hold onto his anger, but disgust won out and twisted his face.

“Ew, gross! You don’t have to say it *like that!*”. With that, Steve knew they were going to be OK. For now.

The house was deathly silent. Normally this wouldn't bother Mike, but knowing he was the reason for it made it settle differently. He had been dreading today, hated the idea of starting high school without El or Will there with him. He still had Lucas and Dustin, but they were busy with their own friends; Lucas had Max, who he respected but didn't feel close to, and Dustin had his new friend Robin, who greeted them at the entrance before swanning off, dragging Dustin with her. Lucas and Max didn't hang around much longer, going off together as they had the same first lesson, leaving Mike alone to figure out his own. Nancy had spotted him, but they still weren't talking to each other, so they both pretended they hadn't made eye contact.

By the time lunch came around, he was grouchy and snappish, which annoyed Max to the point she kicked him in the shin and stormed off, Lucas running to catch up after a moment of confusion. Luckily, their antics didn't cause that much of a stir, but it was enough to attract Troy's attention. Troy had been gone all last year, his parents having sent him to a boarding school after the events with El. That was until he got expelled for fighting and threatening another student with a knife, having to come crawling back to Hawkins with his tail between his legs. Mike had found out he was back last month, after he cornered Dustin and Lucas at the arcade, throwing around threats until Max came between them and kned him in the balls. He left them alone after that, but only as long as Max was around. Now Mike had sent her packing. *Shit!*

Troy had already made some new friends it seemed, both with shaved heads, crooked noses and cruel, twisted smirks. He had grown a lot over the last year, but so had Mike and he still stood a couple of inches taller. Although Troy was the broader of the two. Mike just ignored him as he spouted off bullshit and childish taunts. Troy was nothing to him anymore, inconsequential in the face of the real monsters he has fought. He would have just gone on pretending he didn't exist if he hadn't brought up Will. "So, where's Zombie Boy? He finally die? *Oh, I know!* Your freaky girlfriend killed him! What, did she catch 'im trying to suck you off?". Troy started to do an offensive imitation of Will, with a high-pitched voice. "*Oh, Mike, please let me suck your dick! Please! I'm begging on my knees, just a tast-*" Troy didn't get to finish before Mike's fist met his nose with a

nauseating crunch and a spurt of blood. He fell to the floor and Mike followed him down with a guttural roar, straddling his chest to pound him repeatedly in the face. A sickening glee writhed in his stomach seeing Troy so helpless and so evidently in pain. Mike unleashed all his pent-up rage on him, until he felt a weighty hand wrestle him away. He was dragged off, but not before he looked back and saw Troy spit out a tooth and start wailing.

He had been taken straight to the Principles office by the basketball coach, who lectured him the whole way about how fighting only led down dark paths and instability, how he'd end up dying young. Mike was surprised he didn't bring up Max's brother as some kind of evidence to his point, but maybe he had enough sense not to disrespect the still fairly recently deceased by using them as some sort of PSA. The Principle was already waiting outside his office with his hands on his hips, bold head shiny with sweat under the fluorescent lights and belly testing the limits of his shirt buttons. Mike can't remember much of what was said, other than he was suspended for two weeks and that his mother would be called. He had expected it but hearing it out loud had still sent a shock of anxiety through him.

He had been forced to wait outside of his office for his mum to arrive, but for some reason they couldn't get a hold of her. So, he was still sat there when Troy's mum came racing through the front doors. She barely spared him a glance but seemed more resigned than angry. Maybe all his fights at boarding school had made her indifferent to them now. However, when Troy was brought to her by the school nurse, she rushed to him and held him to her chest whilst he snivelled into her pressed suit. He remembered hearing that she had been forced to get a job as a receptionist for them to be able to pay for his tuition, all that work gone down the drain. Luckily his mum answered when they called again, not long after Troy left she arrived. *Must have broken the speed limit*, Mike thought. She barely looked at him as the Principle explained what he had done and his punishment, didn't even speak on the car ride home. He had watched her expectantly but all that achieved was he noticed her right cheek was redder than the left. He dismissed it as her having rushed her makeup and accidentally applied too much blusher.

Now he stood at the kitchen sink, peeling potatoes his mum had shoved at his chest when they got home, still not having said a word. The silence was really starting to get to him, she hadn't even put on any music like usual; that and the kitchen was uncharacteristically messy, with their dishes from breakfast still next to the sink, the island covered in flour and flower stems. Looking around, he couldn't spot any new arrangements and she'd stopped putting them elsewhere in the house after they started making Holly sneeze. His mum had been rushing around since they got back, seeming frazzled, but he couldn't hear the swishing of her dress anymore. Dropping the half-peeled potato into the half-filled sink, he went to look for her. He didn't have to go far as he found her sat at the dining room table, elbows on the edge and her head in her hands.

"Mum?". She gave no evidence that she had heard him, so he gingerly moved closer, reaching out a hand to gently lay it on her shoulder. However, he had barely touched her before she flinched away, curling in on herself slightly. Now he was well and truly freaking out, a shiver of fear tingling at the back of his neck; his mum had never flinched away from physical contact before, in fact it was something she thrived on. He used to hate how often she'd hug him or give him a kiss on the forehead, but recently had found comfort in them. In his mind, Mike could see a gaping chasm that swallowed up the floor and made it near impossible to reach her. Then he noticed the miniscule shaking of her shoulders, the very soft sniffles she was obviously trying to muffle. Suddenly, it was like a path rose from the depths, leading him back to her side. This time, he ignored her flinch and hunched over to envelope her in a hug, head resting against her back.

"I love you Mum; you know that right? I know I don't always show it that well, but it's still there. I love you, so I care about you, I don't want you to feel so upset. I-I don't want to lose you, or dad, don't want to lose anyone anymore; but it feels like if we don't help each other now, then that's what will happen. So please, let me help, tell me what's wrong.". She was full on sobbing now, his own tears soaking her pale blue dress, turning it almost navy beneath him.

"Mike, when did you become so grown up? I feel like I missed it. Don't worry, mummy isn't going anywhere. I-I haven't exactly been

the best mother, or even person, this past year and things that I ignored have come crashing down on me recently.”. She shushed his protests and continued. “Don’t try and make me feel better Mike, it accomplishes nothing. I need to own up to my mistakes and stop chasing after fantasies of youth.”. Taking his hand, she gently pulled him into the chair beside her. Her hazel eyes were bright with lingering tears and dark tracks down her cheeks from where her mascara had run. Her right cheek looked even redder under the yellow light cast from the daisy patterned light shade; he wasn’t so sure it was blusher anymore.

“D-Did dad do that?” he asked as he reached out towards her cheek. She took his hand and held it to her there, even though she flinched a little at the first touch of his cool palm. Eventually, she dropped his hand after pressing a quick kiss to his knuckles.

“No sweetheart, no. Your dad would never do anything to intentionally hurt me or you kids,. No, it was someone who did it to show me how far I’d sunken. It might be hard to understand, but it was something I needed to happen.”. She smiled at him softly, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes, they remained full of a sense of resigned sadness. “Now, we are going to go back to the kitchen to finish preparing dinner, and you are going to explain to me why you decided to beat up another boy on your first day of school! Understand me, young man?”. He nodded and followed after her, the spike of anxiety that the upcoming discussion created, drowned out by a warm fondness.

The diner was pretty full of families who must have had the same idea as Mrs Henderson, though most looked quite a bit younger than Dustin. Most likely just starting middle school. *God*, that felt like such a long time ago to Steve, but his senior year had felt like it lasted a decade, so his perception of time was a little skewed. Fighting monsters will do that to a person. They sit in a booth a little away

from everyone else, enjoying the little bit of privacy it afforded them. They all ordered burgers and shakes, Dustin a chocolate one, strawberry for Mrs Henderson, and vanilla for Steve. He was halfway through his burger, having just taken a huge bite and with melted cheese dripping slightly onto his chin, when he looked up and spotted Max walking in with her parents. Steve accidentally gasped and started to choke, coughing violently to dislodge what he had inhaled, whilst trying not to draw Max's attention to them. Luckily, she was directed to the booth near the entrance and sat with her back to them, sending a surge of relief through him. With the panic gone, he became aware of Dustin pounding on his back and he pushed him away, saying he's fine, just went down the wrong hole.

The evening continued on, Max somehow remained oblivious to their presence, even with Dustin's loudmouth. Steve made sure to switch the charm on Mrs Henderson, much to Dustin's chagrin, if the sour face and loud purposeful groans were any indication. He struggles to keep himself from staring, but his gaze would find its way back to them whenever the conversation turned towards school. The blue neon sign proclaiming the diner open was shining onto Max's hair, turning it a vivid purple instead of its fire bright red. Observing her, he was surprised at how dispirited she seemed; even on the occasions she was obviously upset, she still had this fearsome, fiery energy that dared you to try and test her. Here, she barely raised her head, apparently finding the stained acrylic tabletop incredibly interesting. The woman sat opposite was no doubt her mother, her own duller red hair proof enough, but she kept wringing her hands together and glancing nervously between Max and the man next to her.

If someone had asked Steve to describe what he thought Billy's dad looked like, he would have probably said curly blonde hair, blue eyes and a charming smile. Tall, still muscular for his age and maybe with a beard or stubble. Possibly with a few tattoos, definitely a leather jacket; like father like son. Probably an ex-greaser – a rebel that had been forced to settle down after getting a girl pregnant - to account for the ferociousness of Billy and Max. He never would have expected the man sat facing his direction, with his military style haircut and thick moustache. Fairly pale and average in both height and musculature, so ordinary and typical of the other middle-aged dads in Hawkins; wouldn't stand out in a crowd, the exact opposite of Billy,

who could be easily identified in a crowded room. Even his eyes seemed too light to be Billy's - a vivid mix of blue and green – simply a pale blue that was cutting as they roamed around the diner. They met his and for that brief moment, it felt like ice had grown within his chest, before he jerked his own head down to look at the table. Goose-bumps had risen all along his forearms.

When he was inevitably drawn to look back at their booth, those icy eyes were still watching him. Anxiety started bubbling in his belly, when suddenly he spotted something appear just over his shoulder, drawing his attention. Time seemed to come to a stop at the sight before him; there, hovering just behind the man, stood a vision of Billy. Not the Billy he remembered, or even the one he just dreamed about; although, the look in his eyes held a similar anguish to that which had momentarily sparked in his eyes as he had straddled Steve and painted his face with blood and bruises. However, instead of his thick head of blonde curls, this Billy had no hair, which made his ears stick out and look empty without the adornment of an earring. It somehow made him appear so much younger, yet the darkness that shadowed his eyes and the gaunt sharpness of his cheekbones aged him tremendously. Billy stood unmoving, except for the twitching of his fingers against his legs. His clothes were not the ones he died in, but instead resembled doctors scrubs, doing nothing to hide the black veins running up his arms. His stare remained locked on Max, even as his dad leant back and spread his arms along the back of the booth, he barely seemed to register it.

“I must be going crazy!” Steve muttered under his breath, shaking his head slightly to clear it but unable to pull his eyes away. Panic swelled in his throat until he felt like he couldn't breathe through it, stomach roiling with the urge to vomit. Quickly excusing himself, he raced to the bathroom as fast as he could without seeming desperate, taking one last look at the figure of Billy, only for him to no longer be there. Arriving at the men's room, he hurriedly checked no one was in the stalls before locking the main door. He leant against a sink, taking deep breaths to defeat the rising tide of sick. Splashing himself with cold water to cool his now feverish skin and looking up to see his ashen-faced reflection.

“It's finally happened, Harrington. You've finally gone crazy!”. Even

just referring to himself as Harrington had him thinking of the way Billy would growl it during basketball practise. *Shit why did this have to be happening!* One of the lights flickers above him and he was transported back to his confrontation with Nancy and Jonathan, to the monster that had crawled through the wall as the christmas lights went crazy around him. He thought of the phone call from Jonathan, the panic evident in his voice even over the shitty phone connection. *“El described Billy as different, bold, with numbers burnt into the back of his head. That they were like hers. So maybe he never died? Maybe someone took him? They faked Will’s death before, they could do it again.”*. His words had made sense, but when the only proof was the dreams of a young girl who had watched him die to protect her, maybe they were just some part of her wanting him to be alive. Then again, that same girl used to have psychic powers, likely still did but were just dormant, that had opened and closed a gate to another dimension; Billy being still alive wouldn’t even be the weirdest thing to happen in Hawkins. Still, the idea of causing Max even more trauma by giving her the hope of Billy being alive, only to take it away if it turns out to be false, was too terrible for words. Steve can’t imagine he’d even resemble her brother anymore if he *was* still alive, especially if he really was in another place like Hawkins Lab.

Thumping against the bathroom door interrupted his thoughts and an irate voice sounded through the wood, threatening to get the manager or bust the door down. Steve rushed to get it open, not wanting to cause a scene. Unfortunately, standing on the other side with a chilling glare, was Mr Hargrove. Up close, Steve was able to notice his eyes were more of a silvery grey than blue, which did nothing to add any warmth to his glare. As Steve stuttered out an apology and tried to squeeze past him, he was stopped by a large hand at his collarbone, closer to his neck than he was comfortable with.

“I know you. You’re the one who keeps hanging around Max and her friends. The ‘babysitter’, right? Don’t you think it’s odd for a grown man to be spending so much time with kids who aren’t related to him? Well, saying you’re a grown man might be a stretch.”. He pressed in closer to Steve’s personal space. “I would *appreciate* it if you stayed away from my daughter. Poisoning one of my kids with your-“ he looked Steve up and down with a sneer “*softness*, was bad

enough, I don't need you doing it to the other.". With one not too gentle pat on Steve's chest, he moved past him into the bathroom, leaving Steve frozen in place, unable to voice any protest. Not that he would, he was too intimidated. Well, at least he knows where Billy got his sociopathic tendencies.

When he finally managed to force his feet to move, he found a waitress at his table, presenting Dustin with a huge ice cream sundae and a smaller one in front of his seat. Suddenly, his limbs felt twice as heavy as he couldn't bring himself back to a state of enthusiasm. Not when reality felt like it was crashing down on him. Again. However, Dustin spotted him before he could figure out an excuse to leave, waving him back over with wild gestures, nearly elbowing his mum in the face. Steve pasted on a smile as he slid back into his side of the booth.

"Look, Steve! I ordered you a sundae. I remember you saying cookies and cream was your new favourite flavour, though how you prefer that over rocky road I'll never understand.". Dustin had chocolate smeared around his mouth and somehow on his cheek too; but when he dived into some tale about how his new biology teacher is the devil, he started gesturing recklessly with the ice cream covered spoon still in hand.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mr Hargrove walking back out, staring at him as he walked past their booth. Steve swallowed, heart in his throat, feeling like an ant trapped under the burning ray of a microscope. The limited amount of control he had managed to gain back in his life felt like it was slipping through his fingers at an alarming rate; seeing visions of an undead Billy and somehow catching the attention of his father. Looking at Dustin, he seemed so carefree now, but he couldn't erase the image of his dejected figure, of him begging Steve to trust him. So, when Mrs Henderson got up to pay for their food, he leant forward towards Dustin, voice no more than a whisper.

"Tomorrow, come back 'round to mine, there's something I need to tell you.". Dustin opened his mouth to respond but closed it with a clack, having seen how serious Steve looked. He simply nodded instead, and a wave of relief washed over him. Yeah, he could trust Dustin.

7. Secrets

[A/N: Warning for graphic description of violence, also suicidal ideation (kind of). Hope you enjoy this chapter! Thank you my lovely readers!]

He had been moved again. They took him lower and lower, the air getting colder, to the point it stung against his skin. Closer to the monster that lurked on the lowest floor. Dragged down the stairway into hell. At least this new room wasn't blindingly bright; no, this room was the opposite issue, in that it was so dark he had to strain to see anything. They really wanted to keep him blind. He had to hand it to them, it was effective torture; keeping him in a very bright place and once he started to adjust, chuck him into a dark room that made his eyes throb with the strain. The walls felt thicker, outside noise less prominent, likely reinforced steel since he had cracked the rusty iron of his first cage.

Any other time in his life, Billy would have loved to be able to heal from any wounds. Would have made growing up with his dad so much easier; though his dad used to find a cruel joy in seeing the dark bruises blossom on his skin, so if he saw that none appeared it would have probably just made everything worse. Best case scenario would have been getting taken away for experiments, better than getting beaten to death just to see if he could heal then. Made it easier to deal with all the shit he had to endure here, that as cruel as they are, only Shark seems to delight in torturing him; yet he knew his dad would love to be able to do whatever he wanted to him and not have to worry about leaving behind any evidence. Not that that ever really made a difference; his dad rarely ever left bruises in publicly visible places, and the only time the police had ever gotten involved, he'd managed to get them off his back by pleading for compassion towards a single father, abandoned by his unfaithful wife and left a hell spawn of a son. They had just patted his dad consolingly on the back and ordered Billy to behave. Like he was the one in the wrong, the *big* problem.

He's not sure why the only memories that are sticking around are the most fucked up ones, mainly of his dad. Well, the whole traumatic childhood probably has something to do with it, as much as he'd love to trade them for other, more pleasant memories. He's been trying to hold onto them, not that there were many in the first place, but although he can see the faces of the people within them and they play out fine, he feels no connection to them; like when re-watching a film you saw as a child, the scenes and characters seem familiar but he doesn't fully recognise them. Watching them like a film on a cinema screen, distant and impersonal. He can see his memories but not process them, but his dad is always the one constant.

Recently, they've had him down in the monsters den, trying to aggravate it for whatever reason; maybe they think if it bites him, he might turn into some kind of vampire. Except it never tries to hurt him, just continuously watches him. So, they started bringing in more prisoners, gave them weapons, but if they actively tried to kill the creature then one of the guards would shoot them. The blood would then just drive it crazy, killing the others before they even got a chance to fight back, always leaving him unharmed. Until one day, maybe two visits ago, one of the prisoners turned on Billy and sliced him across the bicep. The monster had roared and pounced on his attacker, ripping him to shreds and splattering Billy with his blood. When it was done with the body, it had turned to him, torn sinew hanging from one of the flaps of its head and had butted it against his hand; like a dog begging for praise from its master. This glimmer of a connection had excited the scientists and now here he was, strapped to a table, in clear view of the caged beast.

They electrocuted him, no worse than any other time they'd done so, but the creature didn't know that. Somehow it sensed he was in pain, since he didn't think it had eyes; maybe pain could be smelt in his sweat, like anxiety. When they brought out the scalpel and began making small slices, it began launching itself at the bars trapping it in its cell. They only stopped when the metal began to groan, knowing that even with all their guns, they'd very likely die if it got out. After that, they kept him strapped down but put those electrode things on him again, whilst they used cattle prods to electrocute the creature this time. They kept looking at the machines hooked up to him as they tortured it, shouting at him to watch, but Billy felt nothing as he

watched it yelping at the burning currents running through its body. This seemed to anger them, and he felt a burst of pain in his cheek from where one of them backhanded him.

There was a roar from the cage and Billy looked over just in time to see the monster grab the prod in its mouth and yank on it until the scientist's arm was pulled through the gap in the bars. Before the man had a chance to pull his arm back, it was on him; chomping down hard on the soft bend of his elbow and shaking its head with it trapped in its teeth, until it tore off with a howl of agony and spray of blood. The torn half of his arm was left dangling slightly from the beasts mouth, until it reared back to swallow it whole, it's neck bulging as it made its way down its throat. The room was silent except for the sobbing of the now incapacitated scientist and muffled crunching of bone as the muscles in the creatures throat seemed to crush the appendage. The soldiers eventually made a move to shoot it but the man by Billy's side, the one who had smacked him, started yelling at him; the other scientists joined in until eventually the soldiers lowered their guns. The monster moved closer to the bars of the cage, facing Billy who was sure he was somehow being observed. Staring back, however, he didn't feel like prey. No, he felt like the predator.

Pulling up Steve's driveway, Robin could clearly hear Dustin shouting from inside. When she saw him at school earlier, she had asked how things had gone with Steve yesterday, but he had been a bit evasive and vague. Just told her that he was dealing with something he didn't want to tell anyone about yet. Except for Dustin, apparently.

Neither of them seemed to be able to hear her knocking on the front door, so she jimmied the gate open and snuck around to the sliding glass doors by the pool. Luckily, the doors were unlocked, and she was able to stroll into the war zone that was the living room. Dustin and Steve were stood on either side of the Harrington's spotless deep-

set cream sofa, the latter's hair standing up in every direction and Dustin's unusually hatless. She located his cap under the coffee table, seemingly thrown in frustration. The two were bright red in the face, huffing and puffing.

"What the hell is going on here, dingus? You two getting a divorce or something?" Robin questioned as she moved to settle herself down on the sofa, placing her still booted feet on the coffee table. The two of them whirled to face her at the same time but went right back to glaring at each other. She had been hoping to get some kind of rise out of Steve by putting her shoes on the furniture but dropped them in disappointment after that failed. *God, he's no fun!* Robin thought glumly.

"Is anyone going to answer me, or should I just make up my own explanation?". Neither said a word, so she just sighed and continued "Well, okay then. Hmm, is your kid feeling neglected Steve? Or better yet, did Dustin tell you it's embarrassing for him to have a babysitter now?". The last question finally got a response, with them both shouting at the same time "I'm not his babysitter/he's not my babysitter!". She held her hands up to show it was just a joke and it seemed to spark something in Dustin.

"Steve has something he needs to tell you!". From the glare Steve sent him, Robin guessed whatever it is, was meant to stay just between them. Eventually, Steve turned to her with his arms crossed tight across his chest. She had expected him to look angry, but he just looked resigned instead, kick-starting a pang of worry inside her. Robin knew that Steve struggled more than he let on and she had slowly been trying to get him to open up more. He tended to prefer to bury his head in the sand, rather than face things head on. Even during their capture and him catching her up on all the Upside-Down shenanigans, he was fairly well-adjusted to it all. So, seeing him so overwhelmed, scared the shit out of her. She'd come to rely on him to alleviate her anxiety over just how fucked up her life has become.

"Steve? Steve, you're scaring me...". His face scrunched up in response and he untucked his arms, throwing them up slightly in exasperation. She started pacing, running a hand through his hair, flattening the mess it had become. Robin glanced over at Dustin to see him watching Steve with wide, worried eyes. Whatever they were

talking about, it's a lot more serious than she had first thought. Once Dustin realised she was looking, he schooled his expression into one that gave very little insight into his thoughts.

"Shit, Robin, don't say that! Makes me feel like I'm doing something wrong-" as Dustin opened his mouth to interrupt, Steve just raised his voice and stared him down "-which I haven't. Withholding information until we have all the facts is a good move. You guys are always saying its strategic for that game you play!". Steve was talking unusually fast and waving his arms around, and although he had always been fairly gangly and almost awkward in his movements, it seemed to Robin that his time around Dustin was rubbing off on him.

"Dungeons and Dragons, Steve, we've been over this! It's a game about fantastical strategy, of course we talk about it, but withholding urgent information that could impact our survival, is not a strategy!". Robin was totally lost, unsure whether or not they were still talking about D&D or not. Sometimes it's hard to tell if their arguments were about a real issue or not, since they were both so dramatic that they treated fantasy as seriously as reality.

"OK, so one of you better explain to me what the hell you are talking about! I swear to god, if this is all just about that damn game, I'll bash your heads together for making me worry!". Her outburst seemed to surprise them, and they looked at her with wide eyes, Dustin even had a little bit of fear within his. Although, Robin wasn't sure if it was just because he's not used to screaming women. Steve clearing his throat drew her attention back to him. There was a deeply troubled look in his eyes, but alongside that she could see resolve there, transforming him from her dumbass friend into the mature adult he truly is now.

"Ok...ok ok ok, just give me a minute, I need to gather my thoughts. It's a... sensitive topic.". Steve motioned for her to sit back down, making her aware that she had stood up at some point without realising. He sat beside her and motioned his head at Dustin with his eyebrows raised but Dustin didn't budge from his spot, looming over them. His gaze so serious he could be taken as some kind of avenging angel, if he didn't resemble a cherub more.

A heavy sigh that brushed against her cheek, let her know that Steve

finally seemed ready to tell her his secret. “The other night, before you started back at school, I got a phone call from Jonathan in the middle of the night. Apparently, El has been having nightmares, but that night she said it was different.” Steve swallowed loudly, glancing at her briefly but lingering longer on Dustin, who she saw nod in her periphery. “She had been dreaming about Billy, Hargrove, in the place she used to go to find people. She said he was different, similar to her appearance when she was in the lab. That she was able to touch him, and he felt real. So, she believes he is still alive, but he’s not the only thing that died that night. El felt the Mind Flayer too, watching her, and Billy told her it was still after her.”. Steve paused and Robin wanted to scream at him for leaving it there, but she was too overwhelmed trying to process his words. “I didn’t really believe what she was saying, just thought it was some kind of survivors guilt or something, that had her hoping and believing he’s alive. Then I saw him yesterday, at the diner; he was watching Max and he did look so different, matching the description that El gave. Now, I’m still not completely sure if he is alive, maybe he’s just a ghost. I mean, it’s not that hard to believe, considering we’ve faced down monsters.”. Once he finished talking, Steve didn’t dare look at her, eyes flicking everywhere in order to avoid hers, which just stoked the flames of anger burning within her.

“So, what, you weren’t going to say anything? What the fuck, Steve? I know I call you an idiot but I’ve never actually meant it, until now! Did you not learn anything from the time you were tortured by communist spies?”. Steve shrunk into the arm of the sofa, head bowed but his jaw clenched, seemingly biting his tongue to stop himself snapping back at her. Apparently he was capable of not talking, but only when he should be doing the opposite.

“Listen, I didn’t think this shit was real and I didn’t want to create an issue of it when doing so could cause more problems, if it did truly turn out to be a false alarm. Max, as much as she pretends she’s fine she’s really not and telling her that the brother she’s spent months mourning is alive, giving her the hope of having him back, only to have to tell her we were wrong, is so fucked up!”. With this, Steve finally looked at her, his big doe eyes radiating earnestness. Robin instantly deflated, leaving behind a hollowness where the anger had lived. Of course his reasoning came down to protecting one of his

kids from some sort of emotional trauma.

“Ah Steve, I get that your heart was in the right place, but the risk is far too great to be leaving us in the dark. We need to be prepared for if anything happens again and keeping this from us does not give us a chance in hell!” Robin kept her voice soft, consoling, as she could see Steve’s shoulders drooping with each word and tears begin to cloud the whites of his eyes. She placed a hand on his, that had been digging his nails into his knee. “We need to tell them, okay? I’m sure if you explain it like you just have, they’ll understand why you hesitated.”. A warm, tan hand landed on top of hers and she glanced up to see Dustin crouching before Steve, tears running freely down his cheeks.

“Wow and everyone says women cry too easily.” She laughed awkwardly, trying to lighten the mood a bit, but it backfired, only making them self-conscious and quickly rub the tears away. “Shit, sorry, that was a bad joke. Totally inappropriate! It’s great you guys are so open about your emotions; more guys should feel comfortable being so! You know how I get when I’m uncomfortable or nervous, just start blabbing about the first thing that pops into my head. Not that I’m uncomfortable! I just mean, I’m shit at comforting people, so it makes me anxious.”. Robin could have gone on forever but Steve’s hand against her mouth stopped her, a fond smile on his face. She lunged at him, wrapping her arms around his waist and clinging to him, mumbling a soft ‘sorry’ into his chest. She felt movement against her head and was suddenly engulfed into the arms of Dustin, knocking her skull against Steve’s as he was pulled into the embrace too. She couldn’t stop the giggles that burst from her, hiccups following as it turned to hysteria. Eventually, Dustin and Steve started laughing alongside her.

Being suspended was a lot more dull than Mike had expected. It didn’t help that he was unable to get a hold of any of the Party. Even

though school was still in session, he waited until lunch to radio them, thinking they'd at least be able to answer then. When they didn't he almost threw his walkie talkie in frustration. He hadn't been able to reach any of them the night before either, so hadn't had a chance to tell them he was suspended. Wondered if they had even noticed he wasn't there. He was overwhelmed with a sense of loneliness and a longing to see El and Will. Glancing at the clock and noticing it was nearing 3pm, Mike decided he desperately needed to hear their voices. Luckily, the weather was bright and sunny, with no grey clouds in sight, so there was no chance of it affecting Cerebro.

His bike was exactly where he had dropped it in the garage, the wheels still caked with now dry mud. It was still fairly new, given to him last Christmas, but the seat was already raised to its highest point. His dad kept complaining that he was costing them so much money, since he wouldn't stop growing so fast. It was still good and comfortable enough, even if he did occasionally scrape his knees. Halfway to Cerebro, he decided to make a detour. Since Will and his family left, he's been curious who's now living in their home. However, as he turned onto the driveway, he was surprised to see his mum's station wagon pulled up in front of the porch. Mike couldn't think of a reason for her being here, she had never shown any interest in getting to know the people who had moved in. Just as he was contemplating leaving and asking her about her visit later, the door opened to reveal his mother.

Recently, his mum had been spending less time on dolling herself up with makeup and fancy hairstyles, even wearing her more plain dresses. Not today it seems, as her freshly dyed hair glowed gold in the sun, her red lips bright against her lightly tanned skin and her dress to match. She didn't notice him as she stepped off the porch, turning to face the figure that had just followed her out. It was a slim built woman who also had long wavy blonde hair, though it looks natural as opposed to his mums. He wasn't able to make out her eye colour from this distance, beyond them being light. Her clothes greatly contrasted his mother, with loose black trousers and a flowy green blouse; simple and muted. She didn't seem that keen on his mum being there, arms folded against her chest and chin slightly raised as she looked down at his mum from the porch. His mother seemed to struggle between saying something or just leaving, settling

on the latter. However, as she turned to get into her car, she looked up and caught sight of Mike at the edges of the woods at the end of the driveway. Her expression turned to one of shock and terror, rushing to get into the car and driving off without looking back at him. He followed it with his eyes, before glancing at the house. The woman was still stood in the same place, watching him. They locked gazes for a few moments before she went back inside, all without uttering a word.

By the time Mike made it to Cerebro, the sky was alight with the flames of the setting sun. He took a moment to take in the view, staring down at the fairly peaceful state of Hawkins. In the distance, the once towering Starcourt Mall now stood as crumbled embers, a blackened spot within the greenery. He wondered if the ground would ever heal from the fire, or would it remain a constant reminder of all they suffered and lost. A giant scar that never fully healed.

Mike can't be sure if El and Will would be able to answer his call, either because of bad timing or lack of signal, since they haven't tested if it reached them yet; though if it can reach Suzie, Mike doesn't see why it wouldn't. He attempts to make contact for at least half an hour but gets no response and throws the radio down with a growl of frustration; he regrets it straight away and rushes to check its not broken with a gasp of "*Shit!*". When he finds it perfectly fine, he falls onto his back with a relieved sigh. If Max was here, she'd say he's acting like a toddler throwing a tantrum. *Thank fuck she's not*, Mike thought, *I don't need that right now*. Mike had never been a person who spent a lot of time alone, he'd always had some friends to hang out with, either arranged play dates via his mum when he was really young, and then meeting Will when they started at elementary, with Dustin and Lucas coming along not much later. At home he had Nancy, who used to willingly hang out with him before she started high school. Now though, he'd never felt so lonely. His best friend and his girlfriend both gone and his other friends prioritising others over him. He had been the Party leader, as much as the others protested, but now that it had fragmented, he was nothing.

It took a while to realise a voice was calling through the radio, distorted by the still present static that had been white noise feeding

his contemplations. He couldn't decipher what was being said, except for the word "alive", the voice deep enough he could only assume it was male. Must have been on the wrong frequency. Mike squinted at the radio to see if maybe he had turned it slightly too far, but the needle was exactly where it needed to be. His heart started to beat faster, pounding against his ribcage, as all that ran through his head was Dustin's tale about overhearing the Russian transmission. *They didn't need that shit again!* The voice was still talking, but now was just nonsensical murmurs that left a cold sweat coating his skin. Suddenly the static was interrupted with a burst of sound, and a very familiar voice calling his name.

"Mike? Is that you?" El's soft voice came through the speaker, loud in the quiet of the early evening air. He hurried to answer, fumbling with the handset and catching the talk button, sending thumps down through the receiver. The sounds must have worried her, as she calls out for him again in a higher pitched tone.

"I'm fine! Sorry, I-I nearly dropped the radio handset.". He took a deep breath to calm himself, heart still beating like crazy, but now for a different reason upon hearing her voice. "I'm glad Cerebro can reach you! How are you? Do you like it there?".

"The house is nice. Will made a friend. He's nice...and handsome. I'm not so sure about school. The classes are hard and the people seem...mean.". Mike's eyes bulge at her calling the guy handsome, he hadn't heard her describe anyone like that before, but he pushed away his slight jealousy to focus on her last statement.

"How are they mean? Have they done anything to you? Said anything? If they do, you tell Joyce, ok? She'll handle it."

"Not done anything, just a feeling. Their eyes don't seem nice." Her voice was slightly shaky, giving away how much it was really affecting her. "Will's friend has kind eyes. A good guy."

Mike tried to reign in the jealousy that flared back up, it was hard hearing her complimenting another guy so much; especially since she was so far away from him now. "Oh, so he's handsome and a nice guy? Well, he must be so popular huh. Just be careful he doesn't turn his back on you because he decides you're not cool enough!".

There was a long pause before El responded, and Mike briefly thought they had lost connection. "Turn his back? I don't understand. Do you think we are not cool?"

Shit!

"No! No, I don't think that at all! But, popular people don't tend to think people like us are cool, just call us nerds and laugh in our faces." Mike rushed to explain but felt he didn't do a great job.

"I don't think he would laugh. He's seen Will's drawings; told him they were really good. Will likes him. Said he reminds him of you. Asked if I thought he was handsome, I said I don't know. Will said he is, very handsome."

Hearing that Will was the one who had given the guy the handsome descriptor, relieved him of some of the jealousy bubbling within him. Saying he reminded him of Mike, did that mean Will thought Mike was handsome too, or was this guy more so? He couldn't pretend to not know of Will's crush on him. It became harder to ignore as they got older and Will's gaze started to linger on him, though it took a long time to really understand what it meant. It felt cruel not to tell him he knew, but too harsh to say that as much as he loved Will, he wasn't able to love him like *that*. Especially not after meeting El. He felt jealous at Will calling the guy handsome, but it was different to that of El; with her, he wanted her to call him that instead, but with Will...he just didn't want him to replace him. "So, Will likes this guy? That's good, for him I mean. Wish I could meet this guy though, make sure he's good enough."

"Mike, no, don't come! Too dangerous!" The words exploded from El, causing distortion from the volume of her voice. It felt like his heart stopped. *What did she mean dangerous? Things should be fine now!*

"Dangerous? What do you mean dangerous? El! What's going on?". The static grew louder as he waited for El to respond, though he couldn't be sure if it was just his panic making it seem so. When the radio came back to life, it was with the sound of both Will and El.

"Have you spoken to Steve? He was supposed to tell you what's been going on!" Will's voice cracked through the speaker.

“No, I haven’t seen him since the weekend. I’ve not been in school, so haven’t really spoken to the others either. Why, what was he meant to tell me?”

“Not just you. All of you. All need to know.” El sighed deeply and Mike could just make out soft murmurs from Will. “I have dreams about the Mind Flayer. That it’s still alive. But they don’t feel like dreams. Feel real. Billy is in them. Warning me. He’s still alive, they both are!”.

El may have continued speaking but Mike can’t be sure what she was saying, everything just became white noise as his mind went blank. *No... No! He couldn’t do this again! Not after El barely survived the last time!* “How can you be sure? You don’t have your powers anymore!”.

“No, I don’t, but it feels real. I made a... connection? With Billy, when I saw his memories. Feels like Billy is reaching out to me. The place where we meet is like the void. But it’s his place, not mine.”

“Well, then I’m coming to you! I’m not going to just stay here whilst you deal with that *thing* again! I’ve been suspended for two weeks anyway, and my mum is on this guilt trip right now, so I’m sure I can persuade her!”.

There’re a few loud crackles before Will’s voice came through clearer than before. “Wait, suspended? Why are you suspended?”. Mike could just see the crease of his brow as Will frowned over his wide eyes.

“Troy is back, started mouthing off and I couldn’t take it. So, I punched him.”

“You punched Troy? Holy hell, that’s so cool!”. Mike preened at the awe in his voice. El must have said something to him, as Will gave a soft sigh. “That’s not important right now, mum says that we are supposed to draw it here so we can trick it and get back to Hawkins when it’s heading here. You coming might jeopardise that.”

“I don’t care, I’m not leaving you two to deal with that *thing* on your own! Don’t worry, we’ll figure something out, but first I need to talk to Steve about why he kept this from me!”

“Good luck then. “Will sighed, able to tell that Mike wasn’t going to just let this go. “See you soon then... Maybe.”. Then Will was gone, and Mike could only hear El’s soft breaths.

“Mike, be careful... I love you!” before Mike could say it back, the connection was cut and all that was left was static. Mike flopped onto his back on the now damp grass, the sky now dark enough to see glimpses of stars behind the clouds.

They were so fucked!

The air was thick and heavy and his vision swarmed with large, white particles that resemble pollen. Spores that are sucked into his lungs and embed themselves like roots, to spread and poison him from the inside. The upside of that though, he wouldn’t be stuck as a lab rat forever if he died. He could feel the cold of the metal pressing against the forehead of his body still present in the lab, but it’s like a touch separated by multiple layers; still there but doesn’t feel real. The freezing air and mud beneath his feet felt more real to him now. He couldn’t tell which body was his true body, the one strapped down or this one, travelling through some bleak, dead world full of grotesque monsters that nudge their heads into him. Or do they both somehow exist simultaneously? Billy wasn’t sure, didn’t know if he wanted to be, or if knowing would be acknowledgement of just how fucked his life had truly become. His dad always said he’d either end up dead in some ditch, or in prison; he got it half right at least.

He could feel the giant shadow in the sky, stark against the crimson clouds, watching him like he was a trapped spider. He was sat on the edge of the quarry, rotten trees spread out behind him and black stained rocks below, the deep blue of the lake gone in this world. Instead, a sea of twisted flower buds stares up at him, their bodies shining with the slime that coats them, like some sort of liquid shield. Shuffling from behind announces the presence of more approaching.

He's supposed to bring another back, like the last one, but he knows, somehow, that his body isn't strong enough; not present enough in this world but stuck between.

If he dropped down into that pit of monsters, he wondered what would happen. Would they kill him, or save him? He can see them shifting, restless under the gaze of both their masters. Not that he even understands why they see him as such. Maybe the shadow still lives inside of him and they can smell its existence in his veins. The true poison rooted inside of him. Maybe that's why he can feel it looming over him even in the confines of his cell. Choking him with its heavy presence. Reality has become so blurred to him he can't be sure what's a dream or not anymore. His life slipping between his fingers until all that is left is the sharp rocks of trauma, the soft sand of happiness lying at his feet. He knows there were people he cared about, can see their faces in his mind, but not a single feature sparks a feeling of connection. The worst things in life is always the ones that last the longest.

There's no breeze in this place, everything is just static. Frozen to match the temperature of the hell it is. Billy wonders if that is what this place actually is; hell, full of demons that pervert the innocent beauty of flowers. All that's left for him to do is wonder, trapped as he is; even if he weren't, what is left for him but the truth of the deaths staining his hands. The stain growing endlessly with each new soul dragged down to meet their demise at the creature he brought through into the world. The inevitable ones to come. He can see the blood now, painting his hands and arms scarlet. A tear falls and ripples in the liquid, before more rain down in a pattern of circles attempting to wash away his sins. The tears clear and the blood remains, never to be forgiven. His hands slide in the mud and he brings them to his face; its not mud like he thought, but thick black sludge, similar to what had oozed out of his possessed self. A definitive connection between this world and his own, the life blood that flows throughout it, like this world is bleeding. He wipes the remains of his tears away, smearing the gunk across his cheeks, and pushes himself forward. Precarious on the edge, feet held high above hundreds of mouths hiding razor sharp teeth. With one last push, he is falling, down into the monstrous abyss.

Billy crashes back into his body with a lurch that smashes his head into the metal plate holding him down. It feels like electric is buzzing within him but without the burn of electrocution. Hysterical laughter bursts out of him, to the shock of those around him. It just hit him that they had been expecting him to somehow bring back more creatures, to build a fucking army or something, whilst confined to a metal table and unable to move. Looking at their angry but confused faces just made him laugh harder, tears streaming down his face. Shark, who had been stationed by the door, stormed over to backhand him across the cheek to shut him up. It worked momentarily, until Billy spit in his face. Before the satisfaction settled, Billy felt hands wrap tight around his throat, pressing in on the sides to hit all his vital veins. The bright light above him haloed Shark's figure, turning him into a phantom hovering above him. The edges of his vision blurred as the scientists struggled to pull Shark off him, eventually having to use the cattle prod they reserved for the creature on him. Billy could feel the shocks pass through the ends of Shark's fingertips, cutting through the last tether to reality.

The lap of water against his skin had always been a great comfort to Billy, but never more so than in the recent weeks. Or months, he wasn't sure. The darkness drew him in like a vortex, but he relished in it, rather than feared it. It was his haven away from his fucked-up surroundings, offering a look into life without his existence. There was one girl he kept seeing the most, with bright hair and intense blue eyes. He knew her name but it didn't feel right, lacking any true connection to him or her. Names became meaningless after so long gone unsaid, he knew that from experience, but it was still hard to accept. Would things go back to normal if he ever got away, went back home? Would he remember her again? He wasn't sure. Probably would never know, left here to rot or be torn apart for the enjoyment of his captors.

He opened his eyes to a familiar room, though the walls were more bare and dull. The duvet screwed up like someone had been sleeping in the bed. Each time he came here, there was always something slightly different. This time it was the walls and a now empty bookshelf, though he can't recall what was on them anyway. The shelf beside it was also less cluttered, the most prominent item left an award that read "Best Pitcher". Billy clenched his jaw upon seeing it,

wanting to smash it into a thousand pieces all over the worn carpet. He resists the urge though, not that he really could have destroyed it in his current state. The carpet is soft below his feet, he can even curl his toes into the fibres, but the water lies on it like an invisible flood. Boundaries between the dimensions decreasing each time he visits, but not enough that he can do more than touch things, just light glances of his fingertips across them.

The slam of the door surprises him and he swings around to see the redhead, Max, storming into the room. Her cheeks are burning bright and the frown across her brow tells of the rage within her. She throws her backpack at the wall, and it leaves a line where the paint scratched off. "Fuck!" she screams, smashing her fists into the back of the door. The lack of thundering footsteps rushing to her door tells Billy that it is only them in the house. He wishes he could ask her what was wrong as she collapses to the floor in sobs, but he doesn't know her, let alone how to comfort someone. Eventually the cries stop as he lingers in the corner, pressing his back against the bookshelf in an all too familiar position of submission. From her too big denim jacket, she pulls out something small that he can't really make out from between her hands. Billy tentatively takes a step forward, wanting to see it more clearly, but his foot presses down on what must have been a loose floorboard beneath the carpet. The creak of it makes Max jump and her head snaps towards his direction. He sees her eyes blow up as they latch onto him, making his heart freeze mid-beat.

"Billy?" Max stumbles to her feet, falling back down momentarily as her ankle gives away beneath her. "Is that really you Billy?". She reached for him, but he flinched away, not wanting to face that her touch may not be felt. Her hand slowly curls up and falls to her sides, eyes scrunching as tears cling to her lashes. "I knew it! I knew you couldn't really be dead!". This time she moved too quick for him to stop her, too caught up in the hysteria clouding her eyes. Except, he could feel her holding on tightly to his forearms, nails digging in until they are a sharp spark of pain on the edges on his conscious. "Where are you? Tell me Billy! Where the fuck are you?". Her voice has risen in both pitch and volume, desperation coating each word. Looking down at Max's shining, wet eyes, he felt his own answering tears warm his cheeks in streaks; but even with that response, inside

he felt... *Nothing*

[A/N: Hi, so I am considering writing another fic once this one is finished. Post season 2, maybe not canon compliant for season 3, Billy centric fic mostly around his life, family and his persona vs true self. Let me know if you'd be interested in reading it!]

8. A Trip Down Memory Lane

[A/N: Hello my lovely readers, I am so very sorry it's been so long, this year just ran away from me. A crazy year that I never would have predicted when I started this fic. I hope you are all safe and wish you as much happiness as possible. This is only a short chapter, I'd intended to publish it months ago but waited until I was less affected by writers block. Unfortunately I can't guarantee regular updates, as I am back at university, but I will try my very best. I love you all x]

The house was a mess when Nancy got home. She'd stayed behind at the school library to study, wanting to stay on top of her studies with it being her final year, and upcoming early admissions. Though she could admit to herself that part of it was about prolonging going home, not wanting to be forced to interact with her mother. Nancy had been lucky the day before when she arrived home, she was able to sneak past her into her room without being caught, as her mother had been too busy coddling Mike to notice. Nancy had thought it odd but didn't bother to question Mike about it, as ever since El had left he'd been making more of an effort to be nice to her. Nancy knew she would have to talk to her eventually, but she wanted to put it off as long as possible. With the state of the house though, seems that time has come much faster than anticipated.

There were boxes piled haphazardly around the hallway, cardboard turned grey with dust, some with papers hanging precariously over the edges. Picking one of the closest pieces up, Nancy realised it was an old drawing of hers, bright scribbles and crudely written captions announcing it be her, her parents and her old pet goldfish she'd won at a fair. Quickly scanning the rest of the box's contents revealed them to be much of the same nostalgic items. Moving further into the house, she could make out the soft murmur of voices coming from the dining room, turning the corner to see her mother and Mike

hunched over something. Their backs to her, she noticed the way Mike dwarfs her, shoulders seemingly twice as broad. No longer her small little brother, that used to follow her everywhere. It made her chest ache, one step closer to the day their lives would truly become separate; their refusal to talk to each other speeding it along.

Nancy cleared her throat loudly to gain their attention, the two of them jumping at the sound. Mike glared at her after he swung around and noticed her behind them. His welcome back consisting of a grunt before he turned back to whatever they had been looking at. Her mother, on the other hand, brightened upon seeing her and she rushed to envelope her in her arms.

“Oh Nancy, it’s so wonderful to see your pretty face! I was starting to think I’d never get to see it again.” She paused, pulling back to hold Nancy’s face in her hands, a concerned wrinkle to her forehead. “I’ve not completely ruined things between us, right? You still have some trust in me I hope.” Nancy extracted herself from her grasp, unsure how to feel.

The rational side of her pointed out that nothing had actually happened between her and Billy when it came down to it, but the other half resented her for breaking the illusion of their happy family by seeking happiness in the arms of another; especially someone who she went to school with and was barely legal. However, she couldn’t stop remembering the words that Jonathon had said to her when they had been searching for Will in the woods; how by dating Steve she was just setting herself up for a life as a housewife with unfulfilled dreams, just like her mother. How a year later she slept with Jonathon before officially ending things with Steve, all because a stranger called her out for playing it safe. Could she really be angry at her mother for not going through with something that she herself did? She understood the need to escape the confines of a cage built around her by a relationship. Finding an escape within the arms of the least typical candidate, Jonathon the outsider that refused to be boxed in by small town standards; Billy, the unpredictable teenager whose life seemed to be going nowhere but could never be described as boring.

“We’re ok, but I’m not sure how much I can trust you just yet.” Nancy kept her gaze calm and voice strong, not allowing it to waiver at the

flash of heartbreak on her mother's face, before she covered it up with a too wide smile.

"I suppose I can't expect anything more." Her eyes grew big and she started pulling her towards the table with a gasp. "Oh! Come see these, I've been going through boxes from the attic, looking for my old high school pictures. There's even a few of Joyce!"

Spread out across the dining table were numerous yearbooks with various loose photos spilling out. The one sat before Mike was open to a black and white picture of a group of cheerleaders. Nancy recognised her mother as just to the right of the girl in the centre, wide smile bright even in the photo. The other faces were vaguely familiar, aged versions seen around town, except for the girl in the middle. Nancy was sure she had never seen her before, which was surprising seeing how close she seemed to her mother, arms around each other's shoulders and cheeks pressed together. When Nancy pointed this out to her, a melancholic smile curved her lips upwards.

"That's Katrina, but everyone called her Kat. She was my best friend, from nursery right up to high school graduation, only for college to split us apart. She was the prettiest girl in school, but never let it go to her head, always treated everyone with kindness. Never let anyone say a bad word about me." Her expression shifted to one of tangible sorrow. "We'd spent years of our childhood planning our lives together, which college we'd go to, where we'd live together as roommates, that we'd buy houses next to each other when we start families. Life doesn't like sticking to plans though, and a week after graduation she told me that she'd gotten into UCLA and intended to go there, instead of joining me at Indiana Central. I was so mad that I refused to talk to her for over two months, but eventually realised I was being selfish. However, it was too late. Her mum told me that she'd already moved the week before, that she'd tried to reach out to me, but I had been ignoring her. I never heard from her again, not even when her parents died in a car accident, she never returned for their funeral. Until she returned to town last week, apparently she's moved back." Her face crumbled slightly, her eyes glistening under the lights. "I'd always had this idea in my head of what her life had turned out like after leaving me behind, one of perfection and total happiness, with a handsome husband and not a care in the world. I

resented this version of her I built in my head for having such an amazing life whilst I had to drop out of college in my last year to get married and move back here because I got pregnant. It turns out, however, that our lives were more similar than I had ever considered. That my life was the one to be envied.”

Mike spoke up for the first time since Nancy had walked in, an unreadable expression on his face. “Is that the woman I saw you with yesterday? At the Byers place?”

Their mother gently brushed Mike’s fringe aside, resting her hand against his cheek. “Oh, honey. Yes, it was. That house is no longer the Byers home, it’s hers now. That doesn’t take away from your memories there though, you’ll always have those.” Mike jerked from her touch, standing up with his hands clenched by his sides.

“It’s not fair! They shouldn’t have had to move, and they definitely shouldn’t have lost the only place they have to come back to, when they finally come back!” He glared at them both, particularly pointed at Nancy, and aggressively crossed his arms across his chest. “I want to go see them! I’m suspended, so you don’t have to worry about me missing school. A week! Just a week, it’s all I’ll ask for, for the rest of the year. I *need* to see them!” His outburst left both Nancy and their mother in shock, seemingly coming out of nowhere.

“Mike, we can’t just up and visit. They live thousands of miles away now. I’m not even sure we can afford that right now; Nancy will be going to college soon. I can’t drive you there, I must be here for Holly and your father, and he can’t take any time out of work. Nancy has school, it’s her senior year so her attendance and grades are the most important this year.”

“You don’t have to take me! I can take a coach, or the train, even buses, I’ll figure it out! Maybe even find someone who *can* take me.” Mike was shaking now, voice cracking at some points, his eyes wide and pleading. Nancy couldn’t get rid of the feeling that she was missing something, that this was bigger than Mike just missing his friends.

“You think I’ll just let you go off with some stranger? No chance in hell Michael!” There was the sudden ringing of the kitchen timer and

her mother sighed with a glance at the doorway. “We’ll finish this conversation later young man, when your father comes home. Now, you’ll help me prepare the rest of dinner. Nancy, why don’t you go get some more studying done before it’s ready?” Without waiting for a response, she heads towards the kitchen, Mike dragging his feet behind her.

Nancy made to move to the stairs but stopped by the open yearbook. Looking down at the picture of her mother and her friend, an uneasy feeling dug its claws into her stomach. There was something about the woman, something she couldn’t quite place. Something about her eyes seemed unsettlingly familiar, even though she was sure she’d never seen her before. Shaking the feeling away, she finally made her way to her room. She set her bag down by her desk and moved to close her door, but before it shut fully, she heard muffled shouting and the slam of the front door. Well, seems things hadn’t settled down with Mike. Sighing, she decided she’d deal with it later.

When the last bell rang to dismiss the students for the day, there was a mad rush as they all tried to escape the maddening walls of the classroom. Lucas remained seated, to the confusion of his new literature teacher, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. They’d spent the lesson recapping *Jane Eyre*, even though they had all read it in middle school. At the time of reading it, he’d done so purely out of obligation, disinterested in analysing it. However, the aspect of Jane believing she was hallucinating the lady in the attic who was really trapped because of obsession and regret, well it hit a little close to home. At least in the novel the sightings had been real, Lucas couldn’t say the same for Max.

They’d argued the night before after she swore to him that she had seen Billy recently, at the edge of her vision. He’d insisted she was just seeing what she wanted to see, that her unwillingness to let go was finally getting to her. They were supposed to be on a date, the theatre still had showings of *Weird Science* and Lucas thought a fun night out was needed. When she showed up dressed almost identical

to her dead brother again, he'd kind of blown up, torn between worry and exasperation. It seemed like each day more of her was being replaced by this replica of Billy Hargrove and any day now he almost expected his Max to completely disappear. Part of him knew he should have bitten his tongue, but nothing he'd said before seemed to be making a difference. He should have expected it, but the sharp sting of the slap still came as a surprise; as much as they argued, she'd never done more than push him away. He could see in the stormy blue of her eyes, a shadow of regret for hurting him, but the anger devoured it within seconds. He'd reached out for her, but she turned from him, rushing away without looking back. He was sure he saw tears caught on the edges of her lashes. The movie didn't seem worth it anymore, so Lucas had just gone home, ignoring the questions from his parents to curl up on his bed, his own tears finally able to fall freely.

Hands slamming down onto his desk had Lucas jumping in his seat, breaking him from his ruminations, head snapping up to see Dustin leaning over him. "What the hell, Dustin? You scared me, you dick!" Dustin just rolled his eyes and dragged him up, yanking on his arm so hard he thought it would pop from its socket. "Hey! What's the big rush, man? That hurts, let go!" Dustin just ignored him, not releasing his grip until they were stood before Steve's rust red BMW. Lucas didn't see Steve at first, glancing around expecting to see his lanky form loping towards them, but instead it came toppling from the backseat, a hand held to his head as groans fell from his lips. Lucas turned to Dustin for an explanation, but he was jittery, shaking out of his skin with twitchy fingers drumming on his thighs. He swung his gaze between them, glaring, but couldn't bring himself to really care about their suspicious behaviour. He had bigger issues to deal with than their dumb asses.

"Oh, hey Lucas, how's it going?" When he only raised a brow in response, Steve just clapped a hand on his shoulder as he moved past him to the driver's seat. "That's great man, I'm fabulous, thanks for asking. Got a lovely headache, the result of a prolonged hangover. Don't drink kids." Steve shot them a wink before slamming the door shut and Dustin raced around the front to jump into the passenger seat; Lucas could see his arms flailing through the window. Their seemingly excited conversation came to an erupt halt once he got

into the backseat, and it made his skin itch with a sense of estrangement. He knew that the two of them had become closer than he and Dustin had been in a while, but seeing for himself that they were keeping secrets from him, left a burning sensation deep within. Dustin turned his head back and offered Lucas a sheepish smile, but they never returned to their previous conversation. Instead, the silence lingered uncomfortably in the heavy air, until Steve reached across to fiddle with the radio, stopping on a channel playing Madonna. Lucas rolled his eyes at such a predictable choice, but his heart clenched a little at the image of Max it conjured.

The drive to Steve's continued like that, with only the radio saving them from an awkward silence. Lucas hated that this is what has become of the years of friendship between him and Dustin, someone he used to describe vehemently as his best friend. This bitterness bubbling inside of him was only intensified once they arrived, with Dustin and Steve running inside together without even glancing back to see if he followed. A mean thought whispered in his head that he hoped someone would steal the car, since Steve so foolishly left it unlocked. He was left stood in the front doorway, staring down the hallway, brightly lit with lamps left in random places on the floor and side tables. There was a void on the far wall, but Lucas couldn't recall what was missing. Laughter and banging sounded from the kitchen, but he turned away from the sounds of joy, instead heading to the living room and collapsing onto the large, soft cushions of the sofa. Eyes dropping closed with a sigh.

A booming bang jolts Lucas from the dark grasp of sleep, not having realised he'd even drifted off. Another bang sounded throughout the house, but this time he could hear a muffled voice alongside it. Lucas glanced behind him, towards the direction of the main door, and noticed the darkness peeking through the gaps in the curtains. He must have been asleep for a lot longer than he first thought. There was a scrambling in the hallway, and he saw Steve shuffling towards

the front door with wide eyes and a rolling pin in his right hand; held up like a baseball bat with white-knuckled fingers. He watched his mouth open and close without a word spoken, his adams apple bobbing with a gulp. Steve's brows fell into a frown, fingers tightened, and he finally seemed ready to call out when the voice shouted even louder, finally recognisable.

"Steve Harrington, you idiot, open this damn door! I know you're here; I can see your car!" Mike screamed, voice more nasal than usual, breaking at the end of each exclamation. He kept hitting the door as he spoke, like a drumbeat, until Steve finally yanked it open. Lucas could only hear what must have been the thump of Mike stumbling over the threshold. The sound of a scuffle peaked Lucas's interest enough to make his way over to them. Mike was trying to wrestle the rolling pin from Steve's hands, a thunderous expression on his face whilst Steve just seemed confused. Dustin was just stood in the kitchen doorway, watching them as he snacked on the fruit loops in his hands. Just as it seemed that Mike was going to win the fight, Steve wrenched the rolling pin from his grasp and held Mike back with a hand against his chest.

"What the hell is your problem? You can't just come here, make a scene at my front door, and then attack me as soon as you walk in!" If Lucas didn't know better, he'd think that Steve really was upset with Mike, but he did, so he knew it was more confusion heavy in his voice. Mike just scoffed and crossed his arms; nudging Steve's hand off him.

"As if you don't already know! I know you have something to tell us, something very important, that we should have known days ago!" Mike's gaze had hardened again, and he took another step towards Steve, almost threatening if it wasn't for the way his lips pushed out into a pout when he was angry. Steve let out a deep sigh, and his posture dropped into one of defeat, shoulders so low he was almost hunched over himself.

"Look, Mike, I get why you're angry, I do. Let's move this somewhere more comfortable, ok? I'll explain everything, but the hallway is not the right place for this." Steve approached Mike like he was a skittish horse, hands held out in front of him placatingly.

“Ah, yes, because that’s the real reason you’ve not said anything yet. Comfort.” Mike’s voice dripped with sarcasm and he refused to budge at Steve’s ushering.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Steve frowned, hands falling onto his hips as he stood slightly over Mike. It didn’t work as well as it used to, with Mike’s growth spurt over the summer. Now there was barely any difference in their heights. “Listen, I don’t know what thoughts are going through that head of yours, but I don’t like that tone. I’m not the bad guy here, so stop acting like I am! Now, go sit your ass down in the living room so I can explain!” Steve shouted with his arm pointed in Lucas’s direction.

For a second it seemed like Mike was going to ignore him, but eventually he dropped his arms to his sides, and he moved towards Lucas, though he continued to grumble under his breath. Lucas could see Dustin and Steve whispering over Mike’s shoulder, who reached out and grabbed his arm when he got close, grip surprisingly tight.

“You know they’ve been keeping secrets from us, right? Not telling us things we have the right to know. I’m not sure if I can trust them anymore!” Mike’s voice was rough but sharp, like jagged glass, unknowing of the pain it causes. His eyes were wide and eyebrows high, a step away from hysterics no doubt.

“We all have secrets, Mike. Even you.” Lucas remarked as he removed his arm from his grasp, trying to be gentle. Once he was free, he turned his back on Mike and settled back into his position on the sofa he had been in before he was disturbed, not looking back to see if Mike followed. Only the change from thundering steps into muffled ones on the thick shag rug that lay behind the sofa, told him that he had joined him. Silence lay thick in the air between them until finally Steve and Dustin deigned to bless them with their presence.

“Now that you’re here, why don’t you tell us what the fuck has been going on?” Lucas half expected Mike to slam his foot down like a child having a tantrum, with the way his voice pitched up until it was almost a whine.

“For that use of language, you can wait a little longer, young man!”

Steve exclaimed around a cold fry dangling from his lips, taken from the plate he'd brought in along with him. This just made Mike huff and drop into the armchair furthest away from them. Steve collapsing onto the ground on the other side of the coffee table, wiping his hands on his crossed legs. Dustin seemed a little unsure as he settled beside Lucas on the sofa.

The silence fell over them once again until Lucas gained the courage to break it. "I get where Mike's coming from." All eyes turned to him, making a nervous feeling tickle the back of his throat. "Everything has felt so odd lately, and it feels like there are oceans separating us all. I have no idea what any of you guys have been doing, I had to learn about Mike's fight and suspension from my P.E coach. Then there's Max, who seems to be going off the deep end!"

"What's that supposed to mean? What's going on with Max? She seemed mostly fine when I last saw her." Steve turned his body to fully face Lucas, a frown cutting deep lines into his forehead. It was still a surprise to Lucas sometimes, how much Steve seemed to care about them. Especially when this time last year they had been virtual strangers.

"Her grief has made her obsessed. I thought by now that maybe she'd be starting to get over him, but it's only gotten worse. She's constantly wearing his clothes, his jewellery, even sleeping in his bed. I caught her yesterday just staring at a picture of the two of them, for like five minutes straight. It's not healthy." Lucas heaved a sigh and glanced back up at his audience. "That's not even the worst of it. Last night, when we met up for a date, she was dressed exactly like him and she professed that he's not actually dead, that she's been seeing him from the edge of her vision. I'm out of my element, I have no idea how to deal with this, how to help her!" Raising his head, Lucas saw Steve's face fall from a soft, pitying expression to one of wide-eyed horror.

"That's what this is all about, isn't it?" The sudden sound of Mike's voice made Lucas jump; having forgotten he was there in the corner. "I spoke to El last night, and she talked about Billy being alive and reaching out to her in her dreams. That he told her the Mind Flayer was also alive and looking for her! You knew and was supposed to tell us! Yet, here we are, having to beg you to say a fucking word!"

Mike yelled, moving to stand over Steve's now hunched form. "Why? Why didn't you tell us? Because of Max? Fuck Max! Fuck Billy! I don't give a shit about either of them, not when El is in danger! Danger that you kept from me, you bastard!" Mike grabbed Steve and started shaking him violently, raising a fist as if to hit him but was pulled off by both Dustin and Lucas before he could. Mike's heaving breaths turned to sobs as he fell to the ground, their arms still wrapped around his body.

Steve avoided their eyes, running a shaking hand through his hair and his breath coming faster. Dustin left Mike's side to take hold of Steve's hands and forced him to follow him as he demonstrated slower breathing. Once he was calmer, Steve finally turned to them, but his gaze still wavered. "I-I barely know or even understand what is going on any more than you do. Don't make it out like I purposefully kept this from you to hurt you, it's barely been two days since they told me. I honestly didn't even know whether to believe them. Until I saw him." Steve held up a hand to stop them, once he saw them open their mouths to talk at the same time. "I was the only one who saw him, at least I thought I was, but it seems like Max did too. I'm still not sure if I think he's alive or just a ghost haunting Max." A heavy sigh slipped from his lips. "But if I saw him, then maybe what El said is really true. Maybe the Mind Flayer never actually died, and it's still after her."

Lucas didn't know how to feel. He'd been so sure that it was all in Max's head, a product of her grief, nothing more. Only, it's not. And he'd made her feel like shit because he refused to even listen to her. God, no wonder she kept dumping him. Mike standing up interrupted his thoughts and he glanced up to see his dark eyes hardened with hints of loathing.

"Those two days could be the difference between life or death for El!" Mike sobbed. Lucas tried to grab for him, but Mike shook him off. "Who else doesn't know?" When he didn't get an answer right away, he screamed it again, spittle flying at Steve. "Who else?"

"Nancy. Just Nancy." Steve said in a weak voice.

"I'll tell her. You better keep your distance, I don't want to see your fucking face around, I can't stand the sight of it right now. Unless you

get another phone call. If you do, you tell me right away, or you'll have another broken nose, got it?" With that, Mike stormed away, slamming the front door hard behind him.

Lucas just sat there after he was gone, trying to order his thoughts. Steve kept stealing glances at him, like he expected him to have an outburst too, but he couldn't find it in him. As if he could hold it against Steve for not believing what he himself had also denied and ridiculed. Sighing, he dropped his head to rest on his knees. He really had a lot to apologise to Max for, but that would have to wait. Right now, he just wanted to wallow in his guilt. It could wait one more day.

9. Pretty in Pink

[A/N: Hello lovely readers, I'm sorry it's been a while since I updated. I had half of this chapter written last year but struggled finishing it until now. It's a fairly short chapter but the next one is quite a bit longer.

I have the next chapter written down I just need to type it up but I might wait to upload it until I've gotten more of the chapter after done.

I would love it if you could leave some honest constructive criticism on my writing in the comments. I'm always looking to improve my writing but especially recently I've been feeling like it's a little juvenile and would love to know your thoughts on that.

Love you all and hope you like this chapter x]

El could barely concentrate in her classes, the teacher's voices talking so fast they became nothing but a drone at the back of her mind. It's been nearly two entire days since she spoke to Mike, she'd expected to hear something from him yesterday, but there hadn't been a word. Considering what had been said that night, she can't stop imagining Mike just busting into the classroom and enveloping her in his arms, finally feeling safe again. The warmth the image brought with it, was quickly blown away with the breeze from the open window; being near her only meant danger, so she needed him to stay far away, even if it crushed her heart.

The chatter of the students around her became white noise and her eyes grew heavy. She'd been unable to sleep the night before, too afraid of what she'd see behind the lid of her eyes. It felt like her body suddenly weighed a ton, soul being dragged down it and through the floor into darkness. Her mind remained active though, screaming inside as she lost control, clawing to remain above the black abyss. It made no difference, she still found herself soaked but shock sparked up her spine at the freezing water; the first time it had

ever had a temperature, which made her fear what was to come when she opened her eyes.

As far as El could see, she was alone; no sign yet of Billy, or the pulsing shadow she'd come to associate as the Mind Flayer. She slowly pushed herself into a standing position, legs braced shoulder-width apart and hands fisted at her sides. She did her best to remain vigilant, eyeing the darkness all around her, but it all started to blur until everything just became solid black, without any shadow or light. She began to count her breath to indicate the passing of time, and of her continued existence. 1, 2, 3, 4...

...145, 146, 147. Suddenly with that last breath came a grunt from behind her and she swung around to see Billy kneeling, holding onto his arm with a twisted expression. Pain. He was in pain. El resisted the urge to reach out for him, instead waiting for him to turn his head to face her. She didn't have to wait long, the slight shift of her foot created ripples in the water and his head snapped towards her. His eyes were darker than the last time she had seen him, like the turbulent waves of the beach she'd seen in his memories. There was the beginning of hair growth on his head, short stubble that glowed gold, the brightest point in the void.

For a long time neither of them said a word, gazes held in a duel, waiting for the other to surrender first. Just as El felt the desire to lower her eyes from his stare, his eyes widened, and his pupils shrunk to the size of pinpricks, a rock in a deep blue sea. His body started to shake, fine tremors that became violent convulsions, until he collapsed to the floor completely. The wet sound of retching stretched across the space between them, his spine snapping into an unnatural arch and legs sprawling. Howls of agony nearly drowned out the cracking of bones, quieting to whimpers when Billy eventually became still. El was surprised by the rancid smell of vomit mixed with dark blood, she'd never experienced scents within the void, but as the icy water soaking her jeans testified, this void was different. It was changing.

A motion caught her eye, dragging her from her thoughts. Surrounding Billy was vague wispy figures, like the ghosts in the films she'd watched with Mike. They reached for him, and though they seemed to pass through him, he jerked in the direction of their

motions. As she watched, the space around them become brighter, the darkness fading until it was like she was looking through a pair of sunglasses. The ghosts became clearer, more solid, as Billy seemed to disappear. Just as she thought that she must be waking up without having a chance to speak to Billy, his hand shot out and yanked on her ankle, pulling her down to the floor beside him.

El lost her breath upon meeting his eyes once again. They were no longer a dark, stormy blue, instead it was like they were lit from within, brightly burning but still with the pinprick pupils. Panic tore through her as he seemed so inhuman, even incapacitated as he was. She was trapped here with him until he let her go, but she wasn't sure if she trusted him to let her go; something in his gaze filled her with a sense of loneliness.

"Max knows." Billy croaked, voice like gravel. His hand was still wrapped around her ankle, but her sock slipped down as his fingers flexed and the scorching heat of his palm was a shock against her damp chilled skin.

"What does Max kn-" Before El could finish her question, Billy was ripped away from her with wide eyes and a scream tearing from his throat. She barely had time to react when she felt something slam into her, forcing the air from her lungs and her eyes into the back of her head. For a moment she seemed weightless, before she crashed back into her physical body.

El collapsed to the ground with heaving gasps, heart racing as her eyes darted around, now only seeing her classroom and wide eyes gawking at her frozen body. Suddenly there was a burst of laughter from behind her, unable to be stifled any longer and quickly joined by more voices. She felt a rush of anger thrum through her veins and rushed from the room, ignoring the half-hearted calls of concern from her teacher. The hall was empty as she raced down it with no destination in mind, the droning voices of teachers from the classrooms she passes becoming her soundtrack. Her eyes catch sight of the lone disabled toilet at the end of the corridor and she crashes through the unlocked door to curl up in the corner after flicking the lock on. She sits with her head on her knees and tears burning as

they fall to soak into her jeans. The tears confused El as she didn't think she felt sad, rather she had to squeeze her hands into fists to stop herself from flinging them out in rage; even though it doesn't really matter anymore, since nothing would happen. El supposed that avoiding unwarranted and unintended destruction was a positive to the loss of her powers. She began to count down slowly from 100 to calm herself, a trick Hopper had taught her.

Even as her heart rate started to slow, El couldn't stop seeing the image of Billy writhing on the floor in her head; the snap of bones breaking echoing in her ears. She'd known when she first saw him in the dark place that he wasn't in a safe place but to see the reality of it

with her own eyes had made her feel like she was looking at her younger self. Trapped with only her captors for company. A banging on the door breaks through her haze of thoughts, looking up she sees the door shaking from the force. She debates ignoring it and staying in her curled-up position for the rest of the day but whoever is on the other side starts yanking on the door to the point she fears it'll break. A sweet, melodic voice calls out, the words a stark contrast to the pleasant tone. "Bitch, you better leave this bathroom before I break in and pull you out by your fucking hair!" This was followed by a louder bang closer to her level, so El guessed they must have kicked the door. Sighing, El crawled across the surprisingly clean floor to the door, using the handle to pull herself up before taking a deep breath and opening the door slowly.

El was surprised by the girl on the other side of the door. Though she did match her sweet voice with her soft blonde curls, wide blue eyes framed with long dark lashes and rosy cheeks, El wouldn't have expected that vulgarity to escape her pouty pink lips. The pink dress she was wearing reminded El of the one she'd borrowed from El all those years ago, but with a ruffled white chest and short puffy sleeves tied at the bottom with white ribbon. Her appearance evoked the image of the porcelain dolls Max kept on the top of her bookshelf, given to her by her mother in the hope of making her more girly. When El drew the door fully open, the other girl pursed her lips and raised one perfect eyebrow whilst she scanned El from head to toe. The look made her a little nervous and she began to fidget with the ends of the too long sleeves of her flannel shirt; she had taken to wearing her older clothes instead of the ones she had bought with

Max, feeling comforted by the sense of home they gave her.

“Who are you? I recognise the face of every piece of shit at this school, but yours is new to me.” The girl stepped closer, her head forced back so she could maintain eye contact, as the top of her head only reached El’s shoulder. Her hand shot out between them, decorated with shiny silver rings and bangles resting against thin, delicate wrists with greenish veins standing out in her pale skin. “I’m Daisy, Daisy Greenfield. Don’t bother making jokes, I’ve heard them all before.”. El hesitated before taking hold of her hand and shaking it firmly once before dropping it to fold her arms low across her stomach.

“I’m E- Jane. Jane Hopper. I just moved here, with my brothers. Jonathon and Will, Jonathon’s a senior. Will and I are freshman.” Daisy nodded her head as she El spoke, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips. El felt her cheeks becoming warmer as silence stretched between them. Just as El started to open her mouth to tell her she was pretty, Daisy squeezed past her to stand on the toilet lid and open the high window, still stretching on her tiptoes to reach. Once the window was open, she turned to face El and gestured for her to close the door. Not thinking, El swung the door shut and locked it but stayed inside the bathroom. Looking back at Daisy, who stood there with raised eyebrows and a cigarette hanging from her lips, El felt herself flush even harder.

“Well, I guess you’re staying then.”. After a moment of hesitation, Daisy withdrew another cigarette and offered it to El. “If you’re going to be here, may as well join me then.”. El took it from her, unsure if she really wanted to try it but didn’t want to seem cowardly under the other girl’s heavy gaze. Swallowing down the thick feeling in her throat, she let Daisy light it and watching her, tried to take a deep inhale but spluttered upon feeling the smoke burn her the back of her mouth. She dropped the cig to the sound of laughter, as her head suddenly felt ten times lighter and the colours of the room began to swim together as tears overflowed with the force of her coughing.

“Slow your roll, Hopscotch. If you didn’t smoke, you could have just said so. I just assumed you did since you locked yourself in here with me.”. Daisy made it look easy as she took a long, leisurely pull before stepping down to stand before El. Maintaining eye contact, she

smirked and ground her shiny white pumps over El's still lit cigarette. "Top tip: don't do things just because a stranger tells you to or gives you something. Especially when you're so sweet!". The last bit was said as Daisy squeezed her cheek with her free hand before she bent down to pick up the now ruined remains and flicked it out the window. When she turned back around, her gaze was heavy lidded but sharp and El felt like she could see into each dark corner of her mind.

"I think we're going to be good friends, Hopscotch. Good friends indeed." Daisy smiled bright with sincerity shining in her eyes and El felt heat blossom in her chest and tingles in her belly. El couldn't stop her answering smile from spreading across her face. She could feel the loneliness that had grown inside her, seeing Will already making new friends without her, slip through her fingers.

Maybe things were starting to look up.

10. A/N: It's Not Over

Hi my lovely readers,

I'm sorry that it's been so long since my last chapter update and I apologise for that. Been struggling with pretty severe depression since the end of January and it's made it really difficult to write. I've had the next chapter finished on paper since around the last update, but it's been a struggle even getting it typed up, so that pretty sums up my current state. I'm trying my best to get the next few chapters done so I can upload again but please be patient with me.

Originally I had intended to completely avoid any promotion for s4 after seeing the initial teaser trailer they released back in Dec 2019/ Jan 2020, but decided to go back on that to try and get a bit more inspiration and motivation.

Last year I went back to tumblr and so if anyone wants to send a message or ask, my username is emsy-things on there as well. If you do send a message, please have the opening be "Hi from AO3" or just AO3, so I'm aware of why I'm getting a message, otherwise I'm too anxious to look at them.

I'm sorry that this note is all that I can offer right now, but I've not given up on this story.

Lots of love x